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INTERNATIONAL ACTIVISM OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE  
INTERWAR PERIOD

A Thesis Presented

by

Clayton M. Kendall

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Masters of Art  
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## **ABSTRACT**

African Americans have a rich history of activism, but their involvement in affecting change during the interwar period is often overlooked in favor of post-Civil War and post-World War II coverage. African Americans also have a rich history of reaching out to the international community when it comes to that activism. This examination looks to illuminate the effect of the connections African Americans made with the rest of the world and how that shaped their worldview and their activism on the international stage. Through the use of newspapers and first-hand accounts, it becomes clear how African American figures and world incidents shaped what the African American community in the United States took interest in. In Paris, however, musicians explored a world free from Jim Crow, and the Pan-African Congresses created and encouraged a sense of unity among members of the black race around the globe. When violence threatened Ethiopians through the form of an Italian invasion, African Americans chose to speak out, and when they saw the chance at revenge against fascists they joined the Spanish Republic in their fight against Francisco Franco.

In the interwar period African Americans took to heart the idea of black unity and chose to act in the interest of the black race on the international stage. Their ideas and beliefs changed over the course of the two decades between the World Wars, eventually turning thoughts into actions and lashing out against any injustice that befell any member of the black race.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the century, the quality of life for blacks living in Africa and those around the globe was bleak. African Americans lived, at best, as second-class citizens. They gained their freedom after the Civil War but soon found themselves thrown backwards by the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of disenfranchisement. They were separated into ghettos and shut out from economic opportunities while their labor was exploited. African Americans lived as if they were colonial subjects in their own country, and blacks who lived in the West Indies or Africa were actual colonial subjects and their rights were limited by nations in Europe. The United Kingdom, Spain, and France held the majority of islands in the Caribbean, and Africa was split up amongst the powers of Europe at the Berlin Conference in 1880. The rights of blacks all over the world were limited by white powers who saw blacks as lesser and defended their right to supremacy.

There were certainly efforts by those living in foreign-held lands to end their subjugation and regain their autonomy, but the focus here will be on the relationship of African Americans and the diasporic community through the catalyst that was Europe. African Americans had a tradition of journeying to Europe, whether to raise awareness for the scourge of lynching like Ida B. Wells or simply for travel like Fredrick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. Douglass talked about the life and culture of France, praising its perceived lack of racism, while Washington noted France's contribution to the world of culture, but was disappointed by what he saw as a lack of work ethic. Going to the old world, the perceived "cradle of civilization," was an attempt to shame the United States

on the international stage and to make the United States look like an uncivilized nation. While the fight against lynching lasted well after Wells returned from Europe and throughout the interwar period, her trip to Europe shows how African Americans were willing to take their activism to the international stage. Europe's place in African American society was an important one and always subject to scrutiny.

During and after World War I, the United States remained an extremely segregated, exclusionary, and racist nation. African Americans continued to face threats from every part of white mainstream society, Jim Crow laws and black codes kept African Americans separate, and the KKK continued to kill with relative impunity. Even those not directly affiliated with the terrorist group were allowed to threaten, injure, and destroy black society. Not even African American uniformed soldiers were safe from white violence. 1917 in Houston, a riot broke out after white citizens attacked black soldiers, and the conflict resulted with the execution of a number of African American soldiers who were willing to die for their country but only ended up being executed by it. The summer of 1919 was known as the "Red Summer" when race riots ripped apart multiple major cities across the nation. African Americans were always targeted and suffered the brunt of the abuse.

At times the interwar period gets lost between the two great events that bookend it. This thesis seeks to fill the gap between the activism of Ida B. Wells and others like her in the period prior to World War I and those who fought for the Double V during World War II and the civil rights movements afterward. While there was activism happening in the United States, I will largely focus on those African-Americans who traveled to Europe, only looking back to the U.S. when African Americans themselves



are looking out at the world. To many African Americans, Europe was perceived by many African Americans as a “civilized” place where they could find acceptance; they could live, practice their art, and whatever else without fear of the racial reprisal they would likely experience in America. African Americans knew of Europe’s colonial actions and began to speak out against it as they came into contact with colonial blacks. It was evident that African Americans feared the “Americanization,” or the extension of Jim Crow, across the Atlantic. While not every African American who crossed the ocean was directly combating racism like Wells, the connections they made with the diasporic black community ended up growing the idea of activism beyond the borders of the United States.

One avenue for viewing African American connections with the broader world is through the close examination of the black press and, when possible, first hand accounts. The press was interested in creating social discourse as much as it was in selling papers, and the fact that both entertainment and the political dealings of African Americans abroad found their way into the press back home showed the importance of these events.<sup>1</sup> The first hand accounts from African Americans in Europe and those in the United States helped ground the ideas being touted in the media.

One of the ideas that aids in the discussion of the importance of Europe within the African American community is the sense of unity they felt with those who travelled to places like Paris. Historians like Tyler Stovall have touched on this idea, as shown in

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<sup>1</sup> An article by Baiyina Muhammad, “The Baltimore Afro American’s Pan African Consciousness Agenda, 1915-1941,” examines the influence Pan-Africanism and its editors had on *The Afro American*. When it came to publications such as *The Crisis*, their motivations were apparent, with connections both to the NAACP and leading the effort to create the Pan-African Congress. The black press planned on doing much more than reporting world events.

his work “Black Community, Black Spectacle: Performance and Race in Transatlantic Perspective.” Here Stovall talks about the African American community abroad, arguing “that Jazz Age Paris represented an extreme example of both black community and black spectacle, therefore casting an interesting and instructive light on the interrelationship of the two. He goes on to argue that Paris was not an exceptional island; rather, it shared a key role with New York, Chicago, and other centers of black modernity in the early twentieth century.”<sup>2</sup> I want to take this idea that Paris was not an island of African American culture in the interwar period and develop it further. The events that took place in the City of Lights had an impact on members of the African American community who made the journey to the city itself. Through the arts and activism, the negotiations of identity that played out in Paris and beyond influenced how the diasporic community saw itself and how they sought to shape the world.

Paris was an extension of the African American community, as though it was any other city in the United States, and, at the same time, it was a completely new place that changed the worldview of many African Americans. The events that took place there, as well as other European locations, and the ideas that were created there affected the global consciousness of many black Americans as well as their connection to the larger world. Those who spent time in Paris helped augment the international and diasporic beliefs that were prevalent in the African American community during the early twentieth century.

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<sup>2</sup> Tyler Stovall, “Black Community, Black Spectacle: Performance and Race in Transatlantic Perspective,” in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, eds. Harry J. Elan, Jr and Kennell Jackson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 222.

It is clear that African Americans had an interest in international events taking place around the world prior to the interwar period, from emigrationist views of Africa to colonial, imperialist actions in Hawaii and the Spanish-American War, but those who journeyed across the sea engaged in the creation of a global imagination where African Americans were not only observers in the world but active participants. African Americans were not rewarded with respect or rights after fighting for the United States in the Great War. Disillusioned by the results of their effort to play along with their nation, African Americans took a broader look at the world and desired to fight racism in all its forms. They knew that fighting for the United States would not help them gain respect from white Americans, but they also knew that they could fight against white injustice and push back against the global color line.

The press created a world for African American readership that became accessible to those who never left the country. By examining the black press, primarily focusing on *The Crisis*, *The Messenger*, and *The Afro American*, the growing relationship between African Americans and blacks from colonies and the rest of the world is illuminated. The connection grew through Pan-African Congresses, nights out in Paris clubs, and other parts of daily life, all of which were covered in the press. Europe was not the only place that found traction in the black press; attention was also given to countries like Ethiopia and Liberia. Stories from the US invasion of Haiti to the Japanese Russo War were given importance, as well as any news that affected the lives of non-whites. The relationship grew on the ground, and reporting grew in the press, which not only covered the actions of African Americans in Europe but also began to speak out for subjugated blacks all over the world in new ways.

Through their coverage of worldwide African activity, the press facilitated the development of Pan-Africanism. The idea of unity between people from different cultures from all over the world is difficult to explain to those who live outside of a diasporic group, and while the term “Pan-Africa” gives a vague idea, Tunde Adeleke’s explanation of the idea is useful, “Afrocentric Pan-Africanism rests on the presumption that Africans and black diasporans possess a harmonious and consensual historical relationship. Implicit is the contention that both share an unbroken chain of history, culture, and identity.”<sup>3</sup> This is the Pan-Africanism that will be explored here – a historical connection between those who had been, and were still being, abused, either by their own country or by white imperial powers.

Many African Americans saw Europe as a place where they could live and thrive, just as it was often presented in the black press, and the idea continued to grow. However, this feeling came into direct conflict with the reality that France and other European nations were still subjugating millions of blacks around the world. African Americans saw the problems they faced at home playing out on the international stage; they saw colonialism as being similar to their own oppression, and they saw fascism as the growth of Jim Crow. This is why the fight for rights took an international approach, why African Americans were willing to confront colonial racism in a global way, and why they were rallying behind the Ethiopians after the Italian invasion of the country in 1935. This is how the threat of fascism eventually became their new target. Through the press, African Americans saw members of the diaspora all over the world being treated poorly, often worse than they were being treated in the United States, and for blacks to be

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<sup>3</sup> Tunde Adeleke, “Black Americans and Africa: A Critique of Pan-African and Identity Paradigms,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 31, no. 3 (1998): 510.

free, they had to be free across the globe. If the abuse of the black race was global, then the fight against white supremacy did not have to be contained within a single nation or hemisphere.

Figures like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, W.E.B. DuBois, and Jessie Fauset spent time in Paris and other cities around Europe. They experienced life in foreign lands first hand, wrote about it in the press, and relayed their findings about what life in France was like for them back to an African American readership. They created and attended Pan-African congresses where blacks from all over came together to craft a better world for blacks, and they spoke out against and protested European aggression in Africa. They even went to Spain to report on and fight against the growth of fascism.

Chapter One will focus on the perception of France in the African American community, which, like other nations in Europe, was considered to be superior when it came to racial equality. Through the press and first hand accounts of performers, writers, and artists, this chapter will discuss the idea of a colorblind France, the reality and myth, and show the ways in which African Americans grappled with European racism. African Americans' time in France connected them to a global consciousness, as well as with other members of the diaspora, which helped them see the limitations of the colonizing nation.

Chapter Two focuses on the history of Pan-Africanism in African American culture and the establishment of the Pan-African Congresses. Diverting from the artistic and cultural coverage, the second chapter focuses on political activism that grew into an international movement when figures such as W.E.B. DuBois followed in the footsteps of Ida B. Wells, making the "negro problem" more than just an American problem, but

rather an international one. African Americans and the black press grappled with their ideas of civilization and race and through great exposure to the international world found themselves encouraging worldwide black unity. They envisioned a world where all blacks could unite under the banner of Pan-Africanism.

Chapter Three examines the importance of Ethiopia to African Americans before and during the interwar period. Prior to the twentieth century Ethiopia held a special place in African American mythology because of the age of its civilization and the importance only grew with the start of the Second-Italo Ethiopian War. Because of their historical affinity for Ethiopia and the growth of Pan-Africanism during the 1920s, African Americans showed solidarity with their fellow blacks through protests, rallies, and even in combat with the Italians. In a way, Ethiopia became an extension of the African American community because many African Americans began to believe that blacks, no matter where they were in the world, were connected.

Chapter Four focuses on the Spanish Civil War and the continued growth of black activism and increasing efforts to see the struggle for black rights as an international one. In the interwar period Spain was the culmination of the Pan-African movement as African Americans crossed the Atlantic to fight in a war that included the loathed Italians. Black unity can be seen through the reports in the press and in the words of veterans themselves, and the growth of Pan-Africanism and the desire to participate in events around the world reached their zenith as African Americans connected their experiences with Jim Crow to Ethiopia's experience with imperial colonialism and Spain's with Fascism. At the end of the interwar period, the global consciousness of

African Americans became inclusive including those subjugated by colonialism or fascism.

The interwar period saw African Americans connect themselves to the world in ways that had not been possible prior to The Great War. They negotiated spaces in Paris and networked with Africans and other members of the diaspora all across Europe, all while creating a global consciousness for African Americans who never left the United States. Those who did not leave the United States had their work cut out for them fighting against Jim Crow and daily racism that not only made life difficult but, dangerous as well. But those who were able to go abroad often found themselves engaging in acts of international activism that merged with Pan-Africanism and helped African Americans feel a sense of unity between themselves and other blacks from all over the world.

African Americans back home became engaged in various types of activism, from protests, to fundraising, and even combat. The growth of activism on the international stage placed African Americans right in the middle of the battle for black rights, but this time on a global scale. In the interwar period African Americans changed their views on the larger black world. Activism moved from working within the constructs of white colonialism to fighting any injustice perpetrated against black citizens anywhere in the world.

## **Chapter 1: France and the Colorblind Myth**

This chapter will examine African American opinions of the French people's perceptions of race. France drew African Americans to the country prior to World War I because of its culture, history, and seemingly colorblind society. I say "seemingly colorblind" because France was still an empire with many colonial holdings. The French were still driven by their mantra of a "civilizing mission," bringing culture to the savages of the world. Even with their history of subjugating non-whites, France saw their reputation of being a colorblind society only grow after the war. The influx of African Americans into the country during World War I gave them the chance to see this acceptance first hand. African Americans were not targets of racial violence in France; they were not excluded from hotels, bars, or even from employment. They were offered both legal and, to a certain extent, social protections against the type of racism that plagued their existence in the United States. African Americans experiences of tolerance in France were shuttled back to the United States through letters and by the black press.

The black press often examined French racism through the prism of American racism, fearing that over time France would become "Americanized," thus ushering in Jim Crow across the Atlantic. But France's colorblind society was more of a myth than a fact, as France still held colonies, still subjugated people of color in and outside of Europe, and although different from American racism, promoted racism and ideas of white supremacy. In turn, many African Americans began to see the struggle of French colonial rights and to support the idea of rights for blacks as not just a national endeavor, but an international one.



The idea of French tolerance has even become a pillar in the study of African American interwar history. Historians such as Tyler Stovall, William Shack, and Andy Fry have addressed the issue of race in France as it related to African Americans but have failed to critically address the idea of colorblind France. By looking at the same press and African Americans who praised France's racial acceptance, both papers like the elite, NAACP-affiliated *The Crisis* and left leaning *The Messenger*, the complexities of the colorblind myth in France are revealed. From the French people's willingness to protect African American visitors from racist attack perpetrated by white Americans to a Senegalese boxer who was singled out because of his race, there was plenty for the black press to examine in the Interwar period. The nuance displayed in the coverage of France by artists such as Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, to name a few, shows the importance of France in the African American community as well as the growth of international consciousness that came from travelling to a new country.

For African Americans France meant new experiences, new people, and the development of new ideas. Whether France was hosting multiple Pan-African Congresses, allowing African Americans to view a less violent white society, or helping them develop relationships with French colonial subjects, the time African Americans spent in the country accelerated their connection to the international world, expanded the struggle for rights on a global scale, and aided in the growth of ideas like Pan-Africanism. Evidence of this can be seen through the black press in the United States, which created a transnational consciousness that not only complicated myths of the day but demonstrated the growing importance of the international black community to African Americans.

### 1.1. Arrival and Relationship with the French

The attraction of France was multifaceted, but the major draw was the myth that France was a colorblind society in which the way people were treated was based on their merit as human beings and not by the color of their skin. This was a reality for many, going back to the mixed raced creoles who found their life easier across the Atlantic, as well as figures like Fredrick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, who respected this welcoming society. Douglass first went to Paris in 1859 and found that France offered black people a better life in the mid nineteenth century. When Booker T. Washington went to France, he stayed with the African American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner, who, like Douglass, swore by France's acceptance. The myth was only further entrenched with the entry of the United States into World War I, as more African Americans were able to make their way to Paris.

World War I opened the experience of a colorblind France to people who might have never made the trip otherwise. A land without racism was not only for the African American leader or the supremely talented artist, but now for the lowly soldier as well. The United States mobilized over four million troops in the fight against the Central Powers, and around 400,000 of those troops were African-Americans, with around 200,000 them serving in France.<sup>1</sup> In *The Crisis* W.E.B Dubois struggled with the question of whether or not African Americans should support the war effort if the United States were to become involved. When the United States finally entered the war in April 1917, Dubois called for African Americans to temporarily overlook their treatment under Jim

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<sup>1</sup> Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 5.

Crow and join the fight for democracy.<sup>2</sup> In his famous and controversial article “Close Ranks,” Dubois doubled down on the idea that now was not the time for infighting, but solidarity must move the race and the nation forward:

We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Dubois and *The Crisis* portrayed the war as a battle larger than the abuses faced by African Americans back home. Dubois hoped that rights and respect could be gained by patriotism, and that the wrongs of Jim Crow would be corrected once white Americans saw the commitment of blacks to the United States. But loyalty requested by Dubois was not rewarded with better treatment, nor did it result in improved conditions upon returning home from Europe.

Even before the war, African-American soldiers were not given the same respect as whites and were often excluded from parades and benefits offered to white veterans. This, compounded with the “Red Summer” of 1919 in which race riots tore across the United States, showed that the “Close Ranks” theory had clearly failed. The sense of loyalty that African Americans were asked to display was betrayed even before the soldiers crossed the Atlantic. When soldiers compared the treatment they received from strangers in a new country to the abuse they received from their fellow countrymen, it is

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<sup>2</sup> W.E.B Dubois, “Close Ranks,” *The Crisis* (New York, NY), July 1918, 112. A. Phillip Randolph was skeptical of the support for the United States that Dubois was calling for. Randolph and Dubois never quite saw eye to eye on the idea of race and patriotism, which Randolph made quite clear by often challenging Dubois’s ideas in his publication *The Messenger*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

no surprise that the myth of a colorblind France became even more popular both in the public and in the press.

While it was probably not a shock, African Americans quickly found out that white Americans were no more willing to respect them when they were fighting for democracy abroad than when they were fighting for their lives back home. The U.S. military exported the substandard physical conditions and segregation that was so prevalent in the United States to Europe. African-Americans often found that their training went unused as they were relegated to the back of the war effort, unloading ships, repairing buildings, and so on. Life in the trenches would have been infinitely more difficult, but blacks found their living conditions to be lacking and disrespectful.<sup>4</sup> They came to fight, not to be day laborers. The United States did not trust these African American soldiers enough to fight in the war and had little interest in providing for a people they did not value.

The U.S. military not only re-created the American status quo while fighting in Europe, but its leadership also attempted to export their brand of racism to the French. In the May 1919 edition of *The Crisis*, Dubois printed documents that proved the extent to which the United States was determined to subjugate their black citizens. The various documents implored the French to distance themselves from African-American soldiers and encouraged them to avoid contact unless necessary. Specifically, this meant no physical interaction, no sharing of meals, and keeping their praise to the bare minimum. The Americans wanted to warn the French for their own good: “The increasing number of Negroes in the United States (about 15,000,000) would create, for the white race in the

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<sup>4</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 7-8.

Republic, a menace of degeneracy were it not that an impossible gulf has been made between them.”<sup>5</sup> Here, there is a defense of segregationist practices, as well as the promotion of fear by showing how many of these “degenerate” citizens the United States had to deal with. This is later followed by a much more blunt warning: “The vices of the Negro are a constant menace to the American who has to repress them sternly. For instance, the black American troops in France have, by themselves given rise to as many complaints for attempted rape as the rest of the army.”<sup>6</sup> These documents tried to convince the French that black Americans were a threat and used their familiarity with people of African descent to play off the black primitive stereotype about rape. It is no surprise that the United States attempted to tap into the idea of primitive masses when seeking to sway a nation that was still very much on a civilizing mission across the world. However, the efforts of the United States to export their brand of violent, segregationist racism were not successful.

There are a few important things to note from the documents published in *The Crisis*, among them the fact that this was the message that African-Americans received back home. The support of the United States in a battle for democracy had not yielded rights for the African-Americans soldiers who were willing to risk their lives for white democracy, and if that was the case, how could readers expect their lives to get any better back home? The other important thing to note is that most French people, including the military, did not carry the same heavy-handed prejudices against American blacks. The black press often reported on the abuse of the U.S. military and the benevolent behavior

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<sup>5</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, “Documents of the War,” *The Crisis*, May 1919, 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

of the French in the same article. *The Baltimore Afro-American* highlighted this when it republished an editorial from a French newspaper:

The colored Americans are very much dissatisfied, and there is much unrest among them on account of the way they are treated by white Americans. In some parts of America black men are lynched every day. In France they are treated as any other Frenchman. In our hotels and all other place there is no discrimination. Let the French appeal for 2,000,000 colored Americans to help build up France.<sup>7</sup>

The printing of the experiences of black soldiers and the abuses of the U.S. military toward them was common, but the reprinting of a French editorial was slightly different. Hearing a positive story about France from a fellow African-American had to be uplifting, and allowed people to dream of a world where they would not be abused, and seeing the French press corroborate the stories of African-Americans gave authority not only to the stories of African Americans in France, but to the idea of a colorblind France.

Another account of the push and pull between white Americans and the French was detailed in an issue of *The Crisis*, and it mirrors the official American documents published by Du Bois in a 1919 issue. The town of Grandvillars hosted both white and black soldiers during the war and held no prejudice toward blacks, much to the chagrin of white Americans. The usual charge was leveled by U.S. military against blacks; they were not like whites, they were dangerous, dishonest, and a threat to the women of the town. Yet the French did not understand the warnings to shun the black soldiers who were there to help them: “Zhentlemen, I do not understand. These other zhentlemen have paid their bills, and they are polite, and you say they are not good enough to eat where

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<sup>7</sup> *The Afro American* (Baltimore, MD), January 1920.

you eat— I *do not* understand.”<sup>8</sup> For the author of this piece, this example of the objection of the French to racism was a clear sign France’s superiority: “The proof that our race prejudice is artificial, abnormal, and rather contrary to nature, is the fact that an uninitiated mind, like that of the French, simply cannot ‘understand’ it.”<sup>9</sup> France was a nation where a black man could be respected simply because he was a man.

Many African-Americans returned to France after the war and were able to extend their stays longer than a short tourist visit. W.E.B Dubois, founder of the NAACP and editor of *The Crisis*, made frequent trips to the city while expanding his network of fighters for racial justice with the Pan-African Congresses. He came to the same conclusion as the African-Americans who came before him – that France was a great place for a black person. When it came to white Americans, it seemed as if they would never respect black men no matter what a they did to prove their worth. It is easy to see why so many African-Americans turned to France for their future.

Even as people accepted the myth before and during World War I, the idea of France being colorblind is framed as a myth because it was one. African-American acceptance in France was based both on their proximity to whiteness and their status as visitors. The colorblind myth did not extend to a black person who resided in France but originated in the colonies. African-Americans were considered to be more civilized because they came from the United States, while their colonial counterparts came from the “dark continent,” which was certainly not civilized, and were on borrowed time in France. Most African-Americans were either there on vacation, temporarily working in

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<sup>8</sup> William Pickens, “Tit for Tat: How Colored Soldiers Defeated the REAL Enemy at Grandvillars,” *The Crisis*, March 1920, 261.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

the booming jazz scene, or enrolling in universities.<sup>10</sup> Even still, the myth has even found its way, often uncritically, into our history books. How did this myth persist? While some African-Americans might have promoted the myth during the interwar period, it was not the only viewpoint they took from the nation of egalite, liberte, and fraternite.

## 1.2. Complicating the Colorblind Myth

Many historians have examined African Americans and the Interwar period, but France's existence as a colorblind nation is not often engaged in a satisfying way. By using sources like the press and letters in similar way as other historians fills gaps in the historiography. In his work *Paris Noir*, Tyler Stovall attempts to show the flaws that existed with the colorblind myth, but he fails to do so when discussing the interwar period.<sup>11</sup> Stovall mentions the coverage of the myth in African American newspapers, but does not elaborate on the reports of France's racial shortcomings.<sup>12</sup> In William Shack's *Harlem in Montmartre*, the myth is actively and uncritically promoted, with Shack telling the story of his father's fine treatment in Paris and then taking the issue of race in France no further.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 51. Soldiers were given the opportunity to enroll in French universities because of their service in the war. Although most African-Americans were shut out of this opportunity, a few were able to engage in the process.

<sup>11</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 3. Stovall uses quotes from Eugene Bullard to support this, "My father had told me in France there are not different churches, or white schools and black schools, or white graveyards and black graveyards." However, his examination of the positive views and negative views tends to skew positive.

<sup>12</sup> Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 74. When examining Parisian news stories from black newspapers, such as *The Chicago Defender*, negative stories about race seem to be absent, "The African American press in the United States frequently commented on such incidents, further underscoring the belief in French tolerance among its readers."

<sup>13</sup> William Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), XIII. Shack writes: "'Mademoiselle from Armentières, parlezvous.' Not infrequently, this verse served as a preamble to my father's descriptions of the hospitality French citizens displayed toward black American soldiers. He made sharp comparisons with the racial hostility they experienced in the company of white American soldiers. A constant refrain were his words, often bitterly expressed, that a 'colored man' in America had to travel and study in France or England to be recognized as 'equal' to a 'white man.'"



Andy Fry's *Paris Blues* attempts to tackle the shortcomings of Stovall and Shack and does so by examining African-Americans in relation to France's fetishization of black skin and culture.<sup>14</sup> In his effort to debunk the colorblind myth, the attention Fry pays to French reductionist ideas about race and their obsession with African primitivism, while failing to give voice to African-Americans, leaves much to be desired. His approach is better suited to a broader discussion of race beyond African Americans, something not targeted by either Stovall or Shack. The absence of African Americans in Fry's discussion and his focus on French ideals lowers the value of the perceptions of African-Americans, while elevating the ideas of a nation that dehumanized a racial group.

Their approaches to the discussion of whether or not France was colorblind are flawed because it is not an idea that can be proven right or wrong. The truth behind an idea is not as important as the fact that it is believed in the first place. Debunking the myth by showing France's problems with race is not quite the right route to take. Examining the actions of the people who a myth is about cannot destroy a myth, but the people who believe or had thought to believe in its existence in the first place can damage it. A myth can be taken down by people of the time refusing to believe in it, and if you look at the black press, as well as the personal correspondence of African Americans in Paris, it is clear that the myth was not as well accepted as it might be in history books. Historians need to do nothing more than simply take an approach and listen to the figures who experienced France first hand.

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<sup>14</sup> Andy Fry, *Paris Blues: African American Music and French Popular Culture, 1920-1960* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 8. "Shack's book is less a critical history than a nostalgic extension of the story...if Harlem in Montmartre is in some ways a myth, it is a lasting and empowering one, which became a historical force in its own right."

As pointed out previously, the foundation of the myth was cemented in better treatment of African Americans by the French that was well documented in the black press. The praise of France for its treatment of African Americans was frequent and often mentioned in direct response to the abuse inflicted on the black community by white Americans. Even so, papers and magazines were not afraid to run articles that highlighted the shortcomings of France when it came to the treatment of African Americans and blacks of any origin. Quite simply, French colorblindness can be problematized by examining the words written by the people who experienced the treatment for themselves.

The previously discussed articles by *The Crisis* came in a wartime setting, in direct juxtaposition the poor treatment of African-Americans by their own military and seemingly extraordinary acceptance from the French people. As the war quickly became a moment in the past and African-Americans entered in to a more day-to-day relationship with the French, their relationship became a bit more complex. The growth of jazz, a black form of music, and the draw of a place where blacks could be treated with respect was something that did not go unnoticed by those looking to find their place in the world. The promotion of a colorblind myth in France became a contradictory dance that many figures and papers struggled with when trying to express their feelings about this new land. The coverage of the treatment of black people in Paris in the magazine known as *The Messenger* illustrates how complicated the relationship between a white nation that attempt to recognized the humanity of people and the black people looking to escape racism was.

*The Messenger* was a monthly publication that ran from 1917 to 1928 out of the hotbed of African American culture of the time, Harlem. Two members of the American socialist party, Chandler Owen and A. Phillip Randolph, founded this left leaning magazine in 1917, and in 1919, the publication claimed to have over 100,000 subscribers.<sup>15</sup> Randolph was one of the more prominent leftist African Americans of the interwar period and remained an important voice in the black community until his death in 1979. Under his leadership, *The Messenger* struck a different tone than that of Dubois and *The Crisis*. In a 1919 issue, the magazine boasted of its “radicalism” and argued that patriotism had to bow to justice and that loyalty was meaningless without an examination of what one was loyal to.<sup>16</sup> The final pillar of their mission statement: “Finally, to devote our influence uncompromisingly to the advocacy of all principles, to the endorsement of all men, and to the support of all movements working for justice and progress.”<sup>17</sup> All of this was in stark contrast to Dubois' message in *The Crisis* of closing ranks, which took more of an elitist stance toward the world. The magazine's stance as a black, socialist, and, therefore, rather international publication, provides an interesting medium to address the colorblind myth.

*The Messenger* touched on racial issues all over the globe, and early in the interwar period the magazine tried to sell its readers on the idea of international unity, so, naturally, France was frequently a topic of discussion. Between 1923 and 1926 *The Messenger* published a number of contradictory pieces. The articles lean negative and

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<sup>15</sup> *The Messenger* (New York, NY), May 1919.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. If this seemed like a shot at the ways that Dubois and *The Crisis* promoted their version of uplifting the race, it is because it very likely was. When Dubois published “Close Ranks” a feud broke out between the two leaders, one that would stain their relationship for the rest of their lives.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

then positive, with very little recognition of previous articles. Right after the end of the war, *The Messenger* starts out with coverage similar to *The Crisis* – positive stories based around the race and military, but it was able to go further than *The Crisis*' elite-focused worldview. Instead, *The Messenger* was willing to explore places of low culture. Jazz and nightclubs were things that Dubois, the talented tenth, and his magazine avoided. *The Messenger*, on the other hand, sold itself as publication of the people, and therefore had to pull from more diverse sources of culture.

In September 1922, *The Messenger* touched on a topic outside their usual comfort zone: boxing. But because a black boxer was being given the run around, it seemed like a story worth their time, even as the author of article wrote that they had never seen a boxing match. Not only was this outside their usual purview, but this incident involved a non-American black. The Senegalese boxer Louis Mbrick Fall, also known as the Battling Siki, was considered a top fighter, but his blackness allowed the French pugilist and then world champion Georges Carpentier to deny the opportunity of a “mixed bout.” For *The Messenger*, this display of racism came as a bit of a shock: “The last place most of us would expect to see the manifestation of race prejudice was in French sporting circles.”<sup>18</sup> The practice of white heavyweight boxers avoiding black fighters was commonplace in America, most notably when Tommy Burns refused to fight Jack Johnson at the turn of the century.

Similarly, Jack Dempsey, an American boxing champion, routinely turned down able black fighters simply because he could do so because of their race. For *The Messenger*, if Carpentier was allowed to avoid Siki, it was a clear sign that the nation was

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<sup>18</sup> “Americanism in France,” *The Messenger*, September 1922, 5.

changing: “If so, France is becoming Americanized. Yet nothing less could be expected. Thousands of American tourists are journeying into France every year since the war. Wherever they go, they carry their propaganda of race prejudice.”<sup>19</sup> In this transatlantic exchange of ideas the French are the blank slate in this relationship— a society in which sins like racism are unknown, and whose members fall for such bigotry when influenced by the more prejudiced Americans. It shows that African Americans might not have seen France as a colorblind nation, but rather a nation that was colorblind when compared to the American policies of Jim Crow and the lynching that occurred. This complicates the idea of a colorblind France, it does not fully divorce the myth from reality, but rather it allows the problem of French racism to be placed at the feet of the Americans. It was not France’s history of subjugation of blacks that allowed this racist attack on Siki, but their proximity to Americans.

Later in 1922, Siki fought Carpentier and won his title, but the battle between Siki and Carpentier was not over, nor were the racial underpinnings that followed any interracial event. After the fight, the French Boxing Federation suspended Siki for his constant carousing and his enjoyment of French nightlife. For Siki, his supporters, and Blaise Diagne, France’s first African member of the Chamber of Deputies, this was a clear racial attack on the pugilist. In his defense of Siki, Diagne noted the comical idea that a French organization would single out a person for enjoying a part of French culture, especially when white Frenchmen were not subject to this type of scrutiny.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

That liberal France would react in a this manner would have come as was a shock to African Americans reading about the nation in the news, but this was easily put in context by the magazine:

We realized that Clemenceau was in America trying to arouse sentiment which might result in securing a cancellation of America's loan to France...Moreover, Negro musicians are there competing against white musicians.... depriving French workers of jobs.... Were it not that France has to depend upon an army composed of nearly one-half Negroes, we suspect that France would shortly become Americanized.<sup>21</sup>

Here *The Messenger* lays out the reason why France is taking a racist turn. Perhaps France was trying to get on the good side of the Americans, and adopting Jim Crow like practices would help with their relationship. As jazz swept the country, African Americans were taking jobs, and the French were only as colorblind as long as their lifestyle was not challenged. Here, *The Messenger* is taking interest in blacks from any origin, arguing that the acceptance of blacks in France was conditional. Blacks, either from the United States or elsewhere, were only accepted while France depended on their exploitation for their imperial strength. This more nuanced take got closer to the heart of France's conditional acceptance, and it shows the critical nature that African-Americans were using to examine France. It shows that above all else, what African Americans feared the most was the spread of Jim Crow and other racist American policies.

In February 1923, *The Messenger* took a serious tone when the former premier of France, Georges Clemenceau, and the leader of French Socialists, Jean Longuet, visited the United States. They were both questioned about the black troops who occupied the Rhineland in the aftermath of World War I, and both tried to downplay the fact that

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

colonial troops were in the Rhineland.<sup>22</sup> However, the article calls them on their bluffs, reasserting France's dependence upon its non-white colonies and citizens. What is most interesting is the way the two men spoke about race as they tried to dispel the importance of it. Clemenceau rejected this idea of racial importance and tried to clarify that the soldiers in the Rhineland were not there because of their blackness:

There are no black troops of occupation in the area of occupation of the enemy. In the second place, I have seen black American troops at the front, and they stood the fire with bravery, too...Now, those black soldiers are always more or less occupying towns in France and always get along perfectly with white French people. Even, I should say, their discipline is stricter than any white troops.<sup>23</sup>

The message Clemenceau projected falls very much in line with the idea of a colorblind society, almost to the point of protest. He repeats ideas that were similar to the ones discussed in *The Crisis*, where the French public dismissed American warnings over the black soldier because they had no reason to fear them. However, when Longuet weighed in on race in France, this acceptance was called into question.

The article continues with words from Longuet that turn out to be much more revealing:

I must tell our American friends that because we have no color prejudice in France the question of the Negro troops does not much appeal to us...May I add that the Rhinelanders object much more to the Moroccans, who, after all, are not black but sunburned white men, because they are usually brutes, while the Senegalese are great children with no cruel instincts?<sup>24</sup>

Clemenceau's defense of black troops falls right in line with a colorblind society, is while Longuet brings this non-racist society into question. In less than hundred words Longuet

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<sup>22</sup> Despite Clemenceau and Longuet's hesitancy to answer the question, the French did use colonial troops in the occupation of Germany after the war.

<sup>23</sup> "Two Frenchmen on the Negro Troops," *The Messenger*, February 1923, 592.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

is able to dismiss the idea of racism in France, call Moroccans sun-damaged white savages, and limit the Senegalese's mental capabilities to that of a child. The contradictions in his statements, dismissing racism while promoting racist stereotypes, are telling in regard to what officials thought about race in French society. Clemenceau and Longuet came from different ends of the political spectrum but agreed that race was not a deciding factor in their nation, even as Longuet engaged in racist stereotypes to defend French society. Race was dismissed only when it was beneficial for whichever argument was taking place. If the argument was about blacks, then the French were colorblind, even as Moroccans were fair game. The problematic French stance on race was open, reported, and critically analyzed by blacks for black Americans to see.

In September 1923, a small piece called "France and the Negro" ran in *The Messenger*. Unlike the previously discussed articles that illuminated France's problematic stance towards non-whites while also reaffirming the need for black soldiers and France's slow slide into "Americanization," this article praises France in direct comparison to the United States. It admired France for its steadfast obedience of equal treatment under the law and further defined the country as a place without racism: "This arrogance and color prejudice are new to the French people."<sup>25</sup> The article gives coverage of France's response to displays of racism by white Americans, which were not acceptable in the nation. After white Americans attacked black customers in bars and restaurants, the French had apparently had enough, and *The Messenger* attempted to shame the Americans while heaping praise on France for their Frenchness: "To use the *Temps*' quotation: We expect Americans to obey our laws on civil rights (whether they believe in

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<sup>25</sup> "France and the Negro," *The Messenger*, September 1923, 806.



them or not) just as we would obey their prohibition laws (whether we believe in them or not).”<sup>26</sup>

World War I brought African Americans to the country, but jazz and the Parisian nightlife offered them an opportunity to extend their stay in the City of Lights. African Americans were there to stay and were kept from the racism of Jim Crow by French law. *The Messenger* here clearly frames France’s treatment of blacks as being a credit to their nation, but this praise of France’s treatment of people under that law and not the military shows a shift of coverage. This article, as well as the coverage of Siki, showed the life of a black person in France after the war had ended. For now *The Messenger* promoted the colorblind civilization and did so in hopes of shaming America to change, observing “Yes, a little French spirit would do much for real law and order in America!”<sup>27</sup> Again, this creates a France that is not only accepting but also actively not racist, and as the numbers of African Americans grew in France, topping out at a few hundred in the 1930s, so did their cultural impact. As a result, the colorblind myth was put to the test.

The next time the discussion of race and France made an appearance in the magazine was September 1924, where the myth was seemingly put to rest. The article was a response to the governmental measure, a law that is never defined, that tried to convince Africans not to come to France, and it shines light on who was promoting these ideas. The article quotes Abraham Lincoln and President Harding on their feelings and reservations about blacks and whites ever being able to live together in harmony. “Some of France’s greatest men have been Negroes. Now has come a change. Why? Because the blacks have been coming in such numbers, and can work so much more

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

cheaply than Frenchman that the latter are being thrown out of work.”<sup>28</sup> Here French racism is not something “unfrench” and reveals itself once economic factors come into play. What is left to the reader to decipher is that the nation that is supposed to be more accepting of blacks than America is only willing to accept African Americans conditionally, which was transparent enough for the reader to see. When pushed far enough, France did not value the presence or humanity of a black person anymore than an American. The difference was that France did not resort to lynching or other forms of intimidation, as was common in the United States at the time.

Jumping to January 1926, an article by J.A. Rogers does not incorporate *The Messenger*’s prior dealings with race and falls in line with the colorblind myth. The Jamaican born writer was a prominent voice in the African-American community and was featured in *The Crisis*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, and often wrote with an eye on the world as it related to the black race. In his column, “The Critic: Do They Tell the Truth,” Rogers compared the racism in Britain and France to the United States. Britain was a monarchy not a democracy, so the lack of rights was not a shock, but France was a place of freedom: “American democracy has not made much headway in France, hence the black man is treated as an equal.”<sup>29</sup> The author goes on to discuss events at famous French cabarets like Folies-Bergere and how both black and white actors engaged in semi-nude dancing and the performance did not end in riots, or worse.

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<sup>28</sup> “France’s Changing Attitude Toward the Negro,” *The Messenger*, September 1924, 330.

<sup>29</sup> J.A. Rogers, “The Critics: Do They Tell the Truth,” *The Messenger*, January 1926, 12. Like Rogers, many important figures in the African American community were from the West Indies. For simplicity’s sake I have chosen to just use the term “African American” and not divide the experiences of Rogers or Claude McKay further. I do this not in an effort over emphasize the importance of African Americans or erase their Caribbean heritage, but rather to highlight members of the diaspora who were vitally important to the African American experience during the Interwar period.

Yet nowhere are there hints of the magazine's past coverage of France or the racist treatment of black people in the country. The dehumanizing comments about non-white soldiers and the "Americanization" of France seem to have faded away in the press: "The French attitude toward the Negro is absolutely different from that American that it seems impossible to realize it."<sup>30</sup> The often-contradictory coverage of Paris is odd, and facts of about race in France got lost along the way. Reports sway back and forth, discussing Paris as a place that has been "Americanized" to a place that could never stand American racism, as evident in *The Crisis* article "Tit for Tat: How Colored Soldiers Defeated the REAL Enemy at Grandvillars." Perhaps at this point Rogers, like many others, saw France as a place to be free from Jim Crow and therefore a place without racism. Yet historians have failed to grapple with the contradictory information that was provided by African Americans who wrote about their experiences and the experiences of others. These articles provide nuance to the idea that the colorblind myth is something modern historians need to analyze for the people who lived through it.

Regardless of the tone, *The Messenger* recognized the problem of race in France, but the paper folded in 1928. They provided black Americans with a view of France that was greater than just the myth of a racism free land. In these discussions, France almost seems to lose agency and is at the will of this seemingly unstoppable force of "Americanization." When France was able to resist the advances of the American worldview, it is because they are a civilized nation that respects the rule of law. The French may not have enjoyed the increasing black population, but they were unwilling to turn towards violence like their American counterparts to assert their authority. This, of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

course, did not hold up because their acceptance was conditional, as previously noted. France's dependence on their non-white colonies left them in an awkward position, because they needed law and order to maintain their power, but lacked respect for their colonial subjects, as made clear by Clemenceau and Jounet.

The colorblind myth is not an idea that has been complicated by historians examining the treatment of blacks in French society, but rather the myth was already being contradicted and grappled with in the interwar period. *The Messenger* provided African Americans with the dual nature of the relationship they had with France, as well as France's relationship with non-whites. It was true that France offered African Americans a relative respite from racism because their brand was not as violent as the sort of racism in the United States and the black press stayed rather consistent in their inconsistency as that was the closest version of the truth for a person of color in France. Even in the middle of their mission to civilize, France was willing to protect African Americans in their place of work, which made it seem like they were willing to go out of their way to protect a people who were often murdered with impunity back home. The colorblind myth was a complicated and nuanced idea, but not an idea that was simply reported on by the press in an uncritical way. While France came off looking like a paradise in *The Messenger*, the colorblind myth was hardly reported on without examination from black publications.

### **1.3. Experience of the Artist and Connection of the Diaspora**

Langston Hughes, Josephine Baker, Claude McKay, and others occupied the same spaces but took away different experiences from their time in France. There were those

like Josephine Baker, Countee Cullen, and Eugene Bullard, who completely embraced Frenchness, and others, like Hughes and McKay, who were skeptical of France and its culture. For those who did not buy the story of French acceptance, the exchange of ideas with people like the colonial protest leaders the Nardal sisters, led to the growth of black unity. For writers and musicians, sharing spaces with colonial peoples helped them understand what they had in common with fellow subjugated peoples.

Paris was more than a vacation spot; it was an extension of the African-American community. Like Chicago or New York, the city attracted those looking for work and in search of a new life. People who travelled were not always the Douglasses or the Washingtons of the African Community, but more like the Tanners. Many were artists looking for a space to expand their art and make a name for themselves. There were academics and writers like Jessie Fauset and Langston Hughes who came for new experiences, but the many African-Americans who made their way to Paris did so because of jazz. Many who came to the city were not yet famous; for instance, Hughes came to France in 1922 but did not have his first published book until 1926, and future jazz stars like Baker and Ada “Bricktop” Smith had performed in American clubs, but it was in Paris where they made their name. Jazz took the world by storm in the early twentieth century, and France’s infatuation allowed African-Americans to explore the world in new ways.

Jazz made its way to Europe the same way as many African-Americans did, through the Great War. Bandleaders such as James Reece Europe and Noble Sissle were decently well known in the United States. James Reece Europe enlisted in the army and was put to work recruiting other African-Americans to join the fight, and he was later

recruited to General Pershing's headquarters to entertain the top brass from all over Europe.<sup>31</sup> Sissle was the drum leader in Reece's band and remained successful after the war by appearing in ads in black newspapers across the United States that promoted his celebrity.<sup>32</sup> The influx of African American musicians to Europe opened the door for non-military men and continued the exchange between African Americans and France.

The civilians who came to France relayed back familiar stories, and there were those who fell in love with France and the lifestyle it offered them. Eugene Bullard traveled to Europe at the age of ten before World War I and started a new life in Paris. When war broke out he joined the French military, becoming one of the first black pilots to take to the skies. After the war, Bullard remained in Paris and became deeply involved in the black community and jazz scene, owning clubs in Montmartre and employing stars such as Ada "Bricktop" Smith and, as a kitchen worker, Langston Hughes. Bullard only left after suffering an injury during the Second World War.

Josephine Baker came over as a girl from the St. Louis vaudeville scene and ended up staying and becoming a French icon. The French fell in love with her and she reciprocated. She spied during World War II for the French Resistance, eventually receiving the Croix de Guerre for her service, and lived in Paris until her death. Both Bullard and Baker represented a larger group of African Americans who embraced a more accepting France, and only seemed to see France as the colorblind place it was sold as. But, just as it was in the press, there were those who came down against the conditional accepting nature of the French.

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<sup>31</sup> Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre*, 14-18.

<sup>32</sup> "O, Sing a New Song," by Noble Sissle, *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), March 31, 1932, 5; Nahum Daniel Brascher, "Noble Sissle Returns with National Auditions Praise," *Chicago Defender*, March 31, 1934, 1.

Langston Hughes found life in France less romantic than Baker and Bullard.

“On the train to Paris,” he wrote in biography, “A dream come true,” but the dream was soon shattered.<sup>33</sup> He had trouble finding work and his experience with the French people was not warm: “I’d been in Paris a month and still no job. At some places where I sought work, the French employees had almost run me away... they knew I was a foreigner of some kind, and they didn’t like me, so they shouted insults.”<sup>34</sup> This was in sharp contrast to the black press that, at times, praised France for being colorblind and people who found success as musicians and club owners, such as Bullard. Hughes wrote friends back home about this hard life: “Stay home! ...Jobs in Paris are like needles in hay-stacks for everybody and especially for English speaking foreigners.”<sup>35</sup> Hughes found a truer picture of France, not by accepting it as a wonderland, but as a place where people were looking to survive and were skeptical of anyone who might challenge them for a job.

This interaction might be attributed to Hughes’ foreignness, as the French were notoriously discriminatory against Italians and other similar groups. Even if it was because of his race, this type of racism was very different from the racism that Hughes would have faced back home. An outsider in France might have been jeered at by the locals, but they did not have to fear being lynched by a mob of aggrieved workers and if they felt that they were being discriminated against they had access to fairer legal recourse. Yet at the same time, Hughes’ blackness limited his chances of becoming

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<sup>33</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), 123.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>35</sup> Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre*, 65.

French. Baker and Bullard may have felt at home in France, but that does not erase the fact that the color of their skin placed a barrier between what was and was not French.<sup>36</sup>

Claude McKay was not taken with the French, either. He had little against the French people, but rather its institutions and its colonizing “mission to civilize.”<sup>37</sup> McKay was not willing to overlook the abuse that France inflicted on its colonies:

The good treatment of individuals by those who they meet in France is valued so highly by Negroes that they are beginning to forget about the exploitation of Africans by the French... It is possible that the Negro intelligentsia does not want to know about all this, inasmuch as it can loosely generalize about the differences in the treatment of Negroes in bourgeois France and in plutocratic America.<sup>38</sup>

McKay’s view goes beyond Hughes’ personal experience; he takes into account France’s actions on the global scale and not just his direct experiences. Instead, McKay’s political stance was a result of the abuse faced by other blacks that were being subjugated around the world by the French republic. Just like the press, the attitudes of McKay and Hughes show how the experiences of black in France varied. The views from McKay also show a connection between blacks in relation to France and Europe that was not shown in the press immediately after the war. Once the 1919 Pan-African Congress was underway, and the exchange between African Americans and French Africans grew stronger, the press often became as critical as McKay. It seemed that discrimination was a vital part of the African

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<sup>36</sup> As will be seen with Josephine Baker, a black person could gain a good deal of acceptance in France. Baker adopted many French customs and received French awards, but what is most telling is her ability to win the “Queen of the Colonies” award. The fact that she was an American did not affect her eligibility; rather, what made her able to ascribe to a colonial identity was the color of her skin. Blackness permitted her to link herself with the French colonies. However, that same blackness could prevent her from being French in the minds of those who would not accept the colonies as a true extension of France.

<sup>37</sup> Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 96.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.



American experience in interwar France as it related to the growth of Pan-African unity and the turn to international activism.

African Americans engaged with Africans and other members of the diaspora at many different levels, from the Pan-African Congress to negotiation of shared cultural spaces in Paris to the idea of wanting a stronger connection with France. Eugene Bullard told his children, and documented in his memoir, that his father was from the French held island of Martinique, he actually grew up in Columbus, Georgia and did not adopt this French ancestry until he was in the French military.<sup>39</sup> Josephine Baker often relied on the idea of primitivism for her shows, relying on the French obsession with African culture. In 1931, Baker became the Queen of the Colonial Exposition despite the fact that she was not from a French colony.<sup>40</sup> Her adoption of a colonial mask allowed her to be a part of the colonies while also maintaining her distance from the “true primitive nature” of a colonial subject. Many saw this as a example of what a black woman could achieve in France, while others were critical of her appropriation.<sup>41</sup>

Others had less complex encounters and relationships with black peoples from the French colonies. Hughes, at the request of African American poet and renowned Francophile Countee Cullen, met Renè Maran, a famous writer from

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<sup>39</sup> Craig, Lloyd, *Eugene Bullard, Black Expatriate in Jazz-Age Paris* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 157.

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: the Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 33. Tiémoko Garan Kouyaté, head of an anti-colonial paper in Paris, attacked Baker quite harshly, “the notorious negrophobia of Miss Josephine Baker... We must end this scandal. There are negrophobic Negroes just as there are anti-Semitic Israelites... This star would do best to go display herself in Rome.”

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 30.

Martinique.<sup>42</sup> Maran's book about colonial life, *Batouala*, won awards in France and was reviewed by Jessie Fauset in *The Crisis*. Alan Locke, the creator of the New Negro movement, not only met with Hughes, but the Nardal sisters as well. Paulette and Jane Nardal were colonial activists from Martinique who were involved with black unions in France. They met with African American writers and spoke out against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, eventually raising money for the African nation.<sup>43</sup> Claude McKay was deeply impacted by the lives of blacks in France, writing about their lives in his novel *Banjo*, a story about life in the diverse port city of Marseille. African Americans' time in Paris was not just a vacation but also a transnational exchange of ideas and an interconnection of the diaspora.

The coverage of these artists by the press and the coverage of Paris they themselves provided contrasted that of Dubois, who stayed clear from many issues relating to popular culture. The reporting on France as it related to the war defined political realities among France, the United States, and race, but it was the artists who connected Paris and France to black diasporic culture of the interwar period. African Americans' work as foreign correspondents was not limited to Paris or even to France, and throughout the period they made their way to Haiti, Ethiopia, Liberia, and any other place where black issues needed to be addressed. Later I will dive into the coverage of a more political look at Pan-Africanism in other places besides France, but here the focus on Paris here shows the connection

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<sup>42</sup> Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre*, 70.

<sup>43</sup> Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*, 150.

that was made among African Americans, colonial Africans, and the city of Paris itself.

As was stated previously, not every African American in Paris was a star or even became a star. Hughes had published work before he came to Paris and even published work while in Paris, but he became much more famous after his time there. However, there were also those like Eugene Bullard, whose story is amazing, but his fame did not follow him once he left France.<sup>44</sup> While in Paris, Bullard tried to make sure his name was known not only to African Americans in the city, but to those back home as well.

The life of a musician or club owner in Paris was not an easy one; turnover was constant and clubs often did not last the year. Bullard owned the club Le Grand Duc in the years right after the war until 1924, but he still felt compelled to write to the *Chicago Defender* when they mistakenly named Ada “Bricktop” Smith as the owner in 1925, “There has been no change in her employer. I, Gene Bullard, am no longer at the Grand Duke. When I left in August 2, 1924, Bricktop remained with my previous partner as a singer and entertainer, as was understood when I engaged her from America to work for me.”<sup>45</sup> Bullard’s motivations for writing this letter aside, this communication between him and the *Chicago Defender* reveals a few things. The first is that the exchange of musicians that began with James Reece Europe and the military bands continued after the war, and secondly, that the exchange of people was

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<sup>44</sup> Eugene Bullard, the first black pilot, made his way back to America during the Second World War and died in relative obscurity as an elevator operator in New York in 1961.

<sup>45</sup> Eugene Bullard, “Shooting at Us,” *Chicago Defender*, April 4, 1925, 7.

followed by the black press and relayed to African Americans in the United States. Coverage like this shows that the African American community crisscrossed the Atlantic and that the press cared about the actions of Bricktop, and that Bullard found access to these papers in Paris. It is evident that what happened in the black community in Paris was news in the United States, and vice versa.

The coverage of jazz in Paris became an important part of many black papers during this period. While *The Crisis* and *The Messenger* usually stuck to more political issues, weekly publications such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Afro-American* had no problem wading into the world of popular black culture. Throughout the 1930s the *Afro American* ran biweekly sections covering Paris. In 1930, the paper covered the trip of the Hampton Choir in a piece titled “Paris to Welcome Hampton Singers.” The paper observed that: “The message of the Hampton Choir is, therefore essentially musical... It is also a vibrant manifestation to all the world that the intellectuality of the Negro addresses to those who are still imbued with color prejudice and who still obstinately proclaim the inferiority of the blacks.”<sup>46</sup> Two weeks later *The Afro American* noted the Hampton Choir’s success in an article titled “Parisians Applaud Hampton Singers.”<sup>47</sup> These sections often read more like local papers reporting on the travelling of a local band to a big city, and in a way it was. Tours like that the Hampton Choir sold African American culture to the people of Paris, and the black press reported back to those who were not in Paris, keeping them very much

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<sup>46</sup> “Paris to Welcome Hampton Singers,” *The Afro American* (Baltimore, MD), May 24, 1930, 8

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

in the loop as to how African American culture was spreading and how “civilized nations” were receiving it.

Edgar Wiggins covered the goings on of the Parisian nightlife for the *Chicago Defender* with the byline “The Street Wolf of Paris.”<sup>48</sup> His coverage of Paris often centered directly on Montmartre, the area of the where most African Americans stayed. He covered the Bricktops and other musicians of the world when they became stars and up and coming dancers like the Macky twins, but he also gave attention to other African Americans, even if they fell outside of the jazz world. For example, he reported that, “The other evening before the most brilliant audience ever assembled in the Maison Gaveau, Mlle. Marian Anderson, celebrated contralto from Philadelphia, Pa., made her debut on the Parisian concert stage and captivated local lovers of operatics and Negro spirituals the same as she did her vast public in Sweden.”<sup>49</sup> Wiggins reported back the different types of African American culture that were being shown to the world. The Street Wolf of Paris connected African American communities that were separated by the Atlantic and facilitated the exchange between members of the diaspora.

In addition to the coverage that connected the lives of those abroad and those at home, *The Crisis* made an effort to write features about Paris and the literature that was popular during the period. Jessie Fauset, the literary editor for the magazine, wrote five articles in 1925, one a month starting in January and ending in May, reflecting on her time in Paris and how the city had changed since

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<sup>48</sup> Nancy L. Green, *The Other Americans in Paris: Businessmen, Countesses, Wayward Youth, 1880-1941* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 126.

<sup>49</sup> Edgar Wiggins, “Montmartre,” *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL), June 6, 1934.

her previous visit. She visited the Sorbonne, traveled down to Marseille, and ended her trip in Algeria. The articles themselves are less revealing than the journey. Fauset's writing about France could not be complete until she connected with the different worlds that existed there – the connection found amongst traditional beliefs, Paris, the colonial influx, Marseille, and the colony itself – Algiers. Fauset's examination of France through travel followed a route from Paris to Africa, from country to colonial.

Fauset's connection with France and the African community that resided there becomes even clearer in her review of Rene Maran's book *Batouala* for *The Crisis* in 1922. She mentions a few problems with the translation from French, but over all praises Maran's contribution to the literary world. She also makes a point to highlight the differences between African and white culture as portrayed in the book: "For once, we have a first hand contrasting picture of two kinds of civilization— first, that of the little sleepy African village... its poverty, its humor, its placid philosophy against the boundless egotism, selfishness and the brutality of the white traders, the '*boundjoudoulis*.' Really there is very little to choose."<sup>50</sup> Fauset's work provides a similar purpose to that of Edgar Wiggins, the Wolf of Paris, showing that black culture, from the United States or anywhere else, could hold its own and even thrive in nations like France.

She tells African Americans of a work of art completed by an African and about a more noble African culture. This allowed African Americans in the United States to see that talented blacks were not just limited to the United States,

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<sup>50</sup> Jessie Fauset, "Batouala is Translated," *The Crisis*, September 1922, 218-219.

but that blacks from Africa and those residing in Europe had an importance voice to add to the black experience. Fauset encourages African Americans to try and learn about the experiences of Africans because they had important stories to tell, and she warns against the white spirit depicted by white traders in Maran's work. Fauset respected the culture of the French, but still offered warnings as to what was at the heart of white people.

Even though the colorblind nature of France does not hold up to scrutiny, the country served as a place of safety for those fighting for the rights of blacks worldwide. Modern historians have promoted the idea that that black Americans did not analyze the colorblind myth, but it is clear through the black press and first hand accounts that this is not true. Old soldiers, artists, writers, and others experienced the France that papers reported on first hand, and their experiences were just as diverse as the press coverage.

Not only do the words of these African Americans complicate the colorblind myth, they show us the transnational connection between them and the community back home, but also the contact they made with colonial blacks and other members of the diaspora. While these African Americans were in Paris they began to take the relationship between members of the diasporic community even further. African Americans had experience dealing with Jim Crow and racism coming from the United States, but the racism that affected black colonial subjects was something that had to be learned. Sharing the stage in clubs or discussing black literature transformed into Pan-African meetings attended by black delegates from all over the world. Paris, as well as London, Brussels, and

other cities became centers of black activism as Pan-Africanism sought to fight white supremacy and free the black world.



## Chapter 2: Pan-African Congress

World War I enabled the average African-American soldier to see a broader world that he may not have been able to see otherwise. After the war, France allowed these men, and now women, to experience the “colorblind” myth of France for themselves and to come to their own conclusions on whether or not it existed. It has been well documented that many returning soldiers came back not to fight a militaristic battle, but a battle for their rights.<sup>1</sup> They had seen a world that did not reflect the Jim Crow existence that dominated the United States and decided that America need to change for them. But Africans-American experiences in Europe went beyond the war. Europe, most notably Paris and London, became homes for Pan-African ideas with the revival of the Paris Pan-African Congress in 1919. Three more would follow in 1921 (London, Brussels, Paris), 1923 (London, Lisbon), and 1927 (New York). It was this connection to Europe that allowed African-Americans to expand their relationship with the international community and with people of African descent from around the world. For example, the connection between Dubois and Blaise Diagne, a Senegalese French politician, shows the growth of African-American ideas about race once non-African blacks became a part of this budding connection. This discourse was relayed back to America through the black press, which only helped ideas of Pan-Africanism grow.

The place of Paris in the African-American community grew from the words of a few, like Fredrick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, to the experiences of many, like Baker, Hughes, and McKay. The place that black peoples from around the world

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<sup>1</sup> Chad Williams, “Vanguards of the New Negro: African American Veterans and Post-World War I Racial Militancy,” *Journal of African American History* vol. 92, no 3 (2007). Williams details the actions of veterans who returned from war only to continue the fight for rights in America. African American activism grew at home as well as abroad.

occupied in the mind of the African American community went through a similar transformation in part because of this connection to Europe. In the nineteenth century, African American leaders like Henry Turner and Martin Delany looked beyond the borders of the United States for solutions and options to aid black existence in America. Before World War I there was coverage on important places in the diaspora, such as Haiti, Cuba, and Liberia, but the focus on black freedom became more refined once the fighting had ceased. The Pan-African Congresses awoke dormant Pan-African beliefs inside the hearts of many African-Americans, something that became clearer once Italy invaded Ethiopia in the late 1930s. It is impossible to track the reactions of individual African-Americans towards the idea of the Pan-Africanism, but it is possible to detail the times this message was relayed to them in the press. By looking at black newspapers and magazines and then at the reaction popular towards events involving blacks around the world, one must look back to Europe to see the revival of the Pan-African movement in the United States. Chapter one focused on how African Americans and the black press responded to a greater connection with the international world, and chapter two will examine the efforts many African Americans undertook to take their new found international consciousness and turn it into a force for rights and black unity. Europe was where African Americans could connect with blacks from all over the world, and the Pan-African Congresses were where African Americans pursued the idea of a united diaspora, eventually shedding ideas of colonialism that at first held it back.

## 2.1. African Americans and the World before to WWI

Much like African-Americans' affinity for Paris, the idea of a strong kinship with Africa came well before the interwar period. The connection was obvious – while white Americans were able to trace back their ancestry to exact nations and, at times, cities or villages, most African-Americans did not have the same luxury. Their past was destroyed twofold by their former white enslavers. First, Europeans took them from their home and denied them their history, and then they took those African lands entirely and made them their own. African-American leaders looked to rectify their history by reclaiming rights in the United States and reclaiming a past that was denied to them by looking towards Africa. Before the term *Pan-African* was in the daily lexicon, black leaders such as Martin Delany and Henry Turner looked at nations such as Haiti, Liberia, and Ethiopia as places to ground their past and cement their community's future.

Martin Delany, the son of a free woman and an enslaved man, was born in 1812.<sup>2</sup> From his low beginnings, he became a voice that mirrored that of Frederick Douglass in the mid nineteenth century. Delany attended Harvard until his white classmates got him thrown out, and he was a major in the United States army during the American Civil War. He became a supporter of the efforts to relocate African-Americans back to Africa, but Delany's views were different than those of Douglass and other leaders at the time who attempted to reduce or erase the differences between the races. James T. Campbell sums up the beliefs and feelings of Delany regarding the concept of race and nationality: "Black people's survival, he (Delany) argued, hinged on cultivating

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<sup>2</sup> James T. Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 58.

‘national feeling,’ a phrase that for Delany connoted not only unity of purpose but also genuine self-determination.”<sup>3</sup>

As whites were defining their own place in the world with nationality, Delany eventually came to the belief that blacks should create their own, not based on borders or geography but on race. These were the first rumblings of Pan-Africanism before the idea picked up speed in the late nineteenth century. The rejection of full integration and equality within white society became popular in both the black and white communities, but the promotion of blackness and valuing it at the same level that whites valued whiteness was a shift in racial posturing. These ideas of black nationalism and Pan-Africanism became more defined with the impending Pan-African Congress, where they also became more inclusive.

Henry Turner was an important figure in the African community in the nineteenth century; he looked to Africa as new home for African Americans, but his view of the continent was hardly inclusive. The African-Americans who examined Africa often did so in a way that was similar to white citizens who traveled to Africa with less than altruistic goals:

The vast majority of black missionaries who went to Africa had no intention of settling there permanently. On the contrary, many saw uplifting their benighted brethren as an opportunity for African-Americans to demonstrate their own relative progress and thereby advance their claim to full American citizenship.<sup>4</sup>

When it came to the religious community, the opinion of African Americans towards Africans, even with the rise of Pan-African ideals, were not very different than other Europeans. African Americans were going to use their “Americanness” to improve the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 144.

lives of backwards peoples. The civilizing mission of African Americans towards Africans of course left out the racial aspect, but held on to the core sentiment of primitivism promoted by white Americans and Europeans. James T. Campbell argues that, “Emigrants were confident that in improving their own condition, they would also uplift Africans. African Americans would bring ‘wealth and refinement, a higher and nobler Christian manhood to develop the resources of that country,’ thus helping; “to redeem its tens of millions to Christ.””<sup>5</sup>

The idea of emigrating to regions outside of the United States was not an idea cultivated by blacks, but rather one that many whites considered to be the most logical step forward for all parties involved. The American Colonization Society, founded in 1812, had been working toward the goal while slavery was still in practice. The society ended up transporting eleven thousand African Americans to Liberia over the course of the nineteenth century. However, most black emigrationists disliked the idea of moving their people back to Liberia and thought that Haiti was a better option.<sup>6</sup> As free black nations, both Haiti and Liberia held a special in place in the hearts of African Americans well into the twentieth century. These early traces of black racial unity can hardly be constituted as unity nor can they be categorized as Pan-Africanism. African American colonies in Africa would still have been colonies. It is possible to argue that black foreign rule could have been better than the racial subjugation committed by whites, but it was hardly ideal for Africans. Though the views and beliefs of nineteenth century African Americans obviously left much to be desired in terms of racial unity and Pan-Africanism.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>6</sup> Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 21-22.

Liberia, Haiti, and Ethiopia were points of black unification before the term *Pan-African* united these ideas under a banner.

As the twentieth century edged closer, African Americans turned away from ideas of emigration, but not away from the idea of helping those who were being abused by white colonial powers. The turn of the century brought the American annexation of Hawaii, the Spanish-American War, and the Russo-Japanese War, all of which became points of interest and contention in the African American community and press.

The annexation of Hawaii by the United States in 1898 led to disagreements that played out in the press. There were those who were wary because of the racial politics behind the actions of the United States, as shown in an article titled “Negroes Not Enthusiastic Over Annexation.” The author of the article got at African Americans fears, stating: “They have felt all along that it was a racial issue to some extent and the further establishing of the decree that eventually the weaker races must succumb to the strong ones.”<sup>7</sup> Other African Americans, however, used race as a reason to defend the annexation: “We can see no serious objection to the annexation of the Hawaiian Islands...southern compatriots seem to oppose its annexation, simply because most of its inhabitants are colored people... colored people of America are more law-abiding, more patriotic.”<sup>8</sup> Here, both sides are taking their turn at international racial politics. Those against annexation adopted a more progressive view, one that granted more autonomy to non-whites and allowed them to determine their own future, while the other group

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<sup>7</sup> “The United States Can Protect Cubans But Not Americans at Home,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, July 9, 1898, reprinted in George P. Marks, ed., *The Black Press Views American Imperialism (1898-1900)* (New York: Aron Press, 1971), 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Iowa State Bystander* (Des Moines, IA) July 15, 1898, reprinted in George P. Marks, ed., *The Black Press Views American Imperialism (1898-1900)* (New York: Aron Press, 1971), 48.

mirrored the emigrationists and those who attended the 1900 Pan-African Conference.

The introduction of more non-whites to the United States would allow them to connect to the nation and lift it up, even showing racist southerners what it truly meant to be a civilized person of color.

The Spanish-American War continued the discussion around American colonialism and the role of African Americans within it, and, again, there were arguments from both sides. Some arguments predated Dubois's World War I article, "Close Ranks" and forecasted his remarks: "let the edict go forth to the American people that we as Afro-Americans are the representatives of a race whose devotion to and patriotism for their country knows no bounds...The Spanish American War will mark a new era for the Negro in our national history."<sup>9</sup> This sentiment of camaraderie was bolstered by the fact that there were a great number of black people in Cuba, "we understand that a great amount of the people in Cuba are Negroes, then we hope to see this government stand by them and protect them from all hazards."<sup>10</sup> These ideas show the perceived connection that African Americans were already forging with black communities around the world, even if they were not necessarily forming bonds with them because African Americans' ideas towards these people were a one-way street. Even so, there remained a colonial nature to these feelings, one that was similar to France's civilizing mission. African Americans could prove their worth by fighting and by protecting black people in Cuba.

Henry Turner weighed in on the war in the *Cleveland Gazette*, wishing that African Americans had stayed out. He quoted a pastor in the article who discussed the

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<sup>9</sup> "Negroes Should Be Patriotic Despite Mistreatment," *Washington Bee* (Washington, DC), May 7, 1898, reprinted in *The Black Press Views American Imperialism (1898-1900)*, 56.

<sup>10</sup> "American Should Stand By Cuban Negroes," *Kansas State Ledger* (Topeka, KS), April 16, 1898, reprinted in *The Black Press Views American Imperialism (1898-1900)*, 24.

troubles of the United States getting involved in a black Cuba: “I used to tell them in the United States, the majority of Cubans were Negroes; now that this fact has dawned upon the white brothers, there is no longer a desire to have Cuban independence, but they must be crushed out.”<sup>11</sup> This served as a warning to those who were willing to try and play the patriotic card – a black was a black to white America, it did not matter where they lived. Oddly enough, Turner went on to give the colonialism and racism of Spain a pass: “But knowing the Spaniards as we do, having been through the entire kingdom, we knew they were far better friends to our race than the United States will ever be.”<sup>12</sup> As we saw in the first chapter, the idea of racism and colonialism in other nations often became something that could be glossed over in the mind of some African Americans. Whether it was France or Spain, African Americans often struggled with seeing the abuses of colonialism perpetrated by other white nations because of their separation from the colonial world. They did not see the daily abuse suffered by people under these colonial nations, but they did know that they did not have to experience Jim Crow or the threat of lynching, and because of this they idealized any nation that was not the United States.

African Americans may have had more political clout than their black brothers in Cuba, but Japan was the ideal nation for all people of color at the turn of the century. Japan had earned that reputation by defeating Russia in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War. The black press wrote that an arrogant white Europe had been taught a lesson by an “inferior race.”<sup>13</sup> Japan became a central symbol in the struggle against the white colonial

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<sup>11</sup> “Bishop Turner Against Negro’s Enlistment,” *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), October 8, 1898, reprinted in *The Black Press Views American Imperialism (1898-1900)*, 89.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Marc S. Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 14.



world, with Historian Marc Gallicchio detailing the importance of Japan to African Americans who were looking outward for solutions to racism: “Some black internationalists viewed Japan as an important symbol that destroyed the myth of white superiority. Others believed that Japan would directly aid black Americans and other victims of discrimination by taking up the cause of racial equality in international politics.”<sup>14</sup> Because of this, Japan’s colonial endeavors were often excused by African Americans, although some did point out the hypocrisy.<sup>15</sup> Most importantly, however, the coverage of the war shows the way that African Americans sought to engage with that community, as well as the acceptance of non-blacks into an international coalition.

Early figures like Martin Delany, Henry Turner, and their supporters started a movement that did not end with relocation of African Americans back to their ancestral lands, but rather created an idea. Race was not something simply used in a negative way, it was not just a tool of the white oppressors. While they failed to expand on white ideas of colonialism at the onset of the twentieth-century, African Americans were still concerned for their fellow blacks and were accepting of any non-whites who were ready to fight against white hegemony. African-Americans who adopted the ideas of racial unity and opposed white colonialism attempted to be the great uniters within the growth of Pan-Africanism.

## **2.2. Conferences and Congresses**

The first Pan-African meeting on the international stage was the Pan-African Conference of 1900. It did host some of the same figures, but it was not affiliated with

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>15</sup> Randolph, one of the founders of *The Messenger*, was among those who criticized Japan’s colonial actions in Asia.

future Pan-African Congresses, though the conference did hold importance in the diasporic world.<sup>16</sup> The conference in London brought black leaders from all over the world together, from Dubois to the emperor of Ethiopia. The conference signaled a shift away from the idea of emigrating back to Africa for African Americans, as most did not see how it would benefit them to move half way across the globe and, frankly, most were just not interested.<sup>17</sup> This meant that the future for blacks in the United States had to be carved out from white society. The fear of white dependency that Delany often worried about had to be confronted in the nation, and not by separation.

Although a Pan-African meeting, the focus mainly turned to those living in “civilized lands” – blacks living in white countries. The petition that was produced does mention poor treatment in places such as Rhodesia, but overall the petition concentrated on the continued existence of indentured servitude, segregation laws, the difficulty of acquiring property, and general issues of becoming a fully enfranchised citizen.<sup>18</sup> There was still little noise made for the idea of self-rule for those in African colonies; it seems that the humane treatment of colonial subjects was good enough. The conference’s ideals had not yet swayed far enough from those of their rulers for that.

The first Pan-African meeting in London of 1900 did not shake the black or the white world. According to Historian J.R. Hooker, “The general feeling in the London press, which was reprinted in the West Indies, was that ‘The coloured gentleman has at

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<sup>16</sup> In October 1927, *The Crisis* wrote about the four congresses that have been held, starting in 1919.

<sup>17</sup> J. R. Hooker, “The Pan-African Conference 1900,” *Transition*, no. 46 (1974): 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

last determined to shift the burden of his race from the shoulders of the white man on to his own.”<sup>19</sup> Yet others were not so optimistic:

The editor of the *Demerara Chronicle* thought that the Conference would do some good to both races, but ‘judging from the remarks made at the conferences we are prone to think that the representatives who meet there are too much inclined to exaggerate their grievances in the New World and to overlook the far larger problems relating to their brethren in the home of the race.’<sup>20</sup>

The response was both patronizing and dismissive. Either it was about time that blacks civilized and started taking care of business, or they needed to stop being demanding and continue living under colonial white rule for the foreseeable future. All of this diminished the problems that still did exist. In 1900, the black press did not exist as it did during the interwar period, with the very few African Americans having the ability to make it to Europe or any other place outside their community in the United States. It is safe to say that this first call to Pan-Africanism did not begin too many debates. But for those privileged few who could attend the conference, Turner, Washington, and especially Dubois, this was the dawning of a new era in blackness on the international stage.

The Pan-African Congress of 1919 was the brainchild of many black figures but would not have been possible without W.E.B Dubois. His determination led to the meeting of fifty-seven delegates from fifteen countries and regions all over the world, with the majority from the United States or the West Indies. Other participating countries included France and their African colonies, England and their colonies, Liberia, and Haiti, among others.<sup>21</sup> How the project of the Pan-African Congress of 1919 began is lost to history, but Dubois was well versed in the transnational aspect of the African

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 24 .

<sup>21</sup> W.E.B Dubois, “The Pan-African Congress,” *The Crisis*, April 1919, 271.

American fight for rights. He was a member of the NAACP, and he clearly took the initiative to try and connect the race around the world for a global fight for rights and recognition.<sup>22</sup> He used trips to Paris to document the experiences of black soldiers during World War I to gather the necessary information and support that were needed to launch the congress. In 1918, he gathered support from both whites and blacks and developed a memorandum that he attempted to get the Wilson administration to reply to, but Dubois had to wait until January 1919 for a response. By that time Dubois was already on a boat to Paris. Even as participants fought through refusals to admit passports and the other similar struggles that came with organizing an international event, the congress began on February 21, 1919.<sup>23</sup>

The congress looked to the Paris Peace Conference for inspiration. The peace conference after World War I may have decided the fates of European powers, but it did little to change the lives of those living under white rule.<sup>24</sup> First, the congress called for greater representation and freedoms in the colonies, and second, they demanded that the newly formed League of Nations be accountable for their black members as well, which is why the call went out to all nations with black subjects to attend the Congress.<sup>25</sup> The meeting itself called for a complete overhaul of the structure of white society that had always denied rights to blacks. In April 1919, *The Crisis* labeled the main points under land, capital, labor, education, medicine and hygiene, the state, culture, and religion.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Clarence G. Contee, "Du Bois, the NAACP, and the Pan-African Congress of 1919," *The Journal of Negro History*, 57, no. 1 (1972), 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Rucker, "'A Negro Within the Nation': W.E.B. Du Bois and the Creation of a Revolutionary Pan-Africanist Tradition, 1903-1947," *The Black Scholar* vol. 32, no. 3/4 (2002), 42.

<sup>25</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, "Memorandum to M. Diagne and Others on a Pan-African Congress to Be Held in Paris February. 1919," *The Crisis*, March 1919, 224.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

*The Crisis* underlined that in all aspects of life, a black person was supposed to be treated with more respect and dignity than their ancestors before them. Even so, there remained a reduction of human life, the idea that earned humanity still existed, “*Civilized Negroes: Wherever persons of African descent are civilized and able to meet the texts of surrounding culture, they shall be accorded the same rights as their fellow citizens: they shall not be denied on account of race or color a voice in their government.*”<sup>27</sup> The demands for rights were not extreme because they still allowed the ones in power to call the shots.

If a black person was deemed uncivilized then, by the standards of the Pan-African Congress of 1919, they could be denied full rights. It is clear that the fight against the practice of colonialism was not quite realized at this point, as many still held the belief that once blacks became civilized, they would be accepted into the white community. This is not surprising as the NAACP, *The Crisis*, and Dubois were the architects behind the congress, and their worldview favored blacks who were part of the elite. This idea would not free those in colonies, or even those being abused in the United States; it would only adjust an unjust system. The pandering to white standards and norms was still on the table, but this Pan-African meeting moved the discussion of rights for blacks forward in two ways. First, by calling for greater representation and freedoms in the colonies, and second, by demanding that the newly formed League of Nations be held accountable for their black members as well.

Even with the pandering, by only pushing for rights for civilized blacks, towards the colonizers, the call for rights and activism for those within the colonies was progress.

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<sup>27</sup> Dubois, “The Pan-African Congress,” 274.

As stated by Walter Rucker, this was not a call for revolution or for elimination of all colonies, but for more rights.<sup>28</sup> This was a step forward for many of the African-American delegates whose predecessors thought that the uplifting of Africa could and should be done by Africans themselves. The call for rights for all blacks was coupled in the valuing of something besides life: culture. The congress called for projects “Collating the history of the Negro race. Studying the present condition of the race. Publishing articles, pamphlets and a report of this congress. Encouraging Negro art and literature. Arranging for a second Pan-African Congress in 1921.”<sup>29</sup> Rights were obviously important, but the congress often examined how they could best adapt to white norms, and the promotion of culture was a perfect way to do that. By having their own *civilized* culture that whites could recognize and respect, whites would see the legitimacy and the merit in the black race.

The importance of black culture was illustrated in chapter 1, with the coverage of African Americans who journeyed to Paris to perform, as well as the coverage of colonial writers like Rene Maran in *The Crisis*. As James Wheldon Johnson, former aid to Theodore Roosevelt and member of the NAACP, said, “The final measure of greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced.”<sup>30</sup> With African American culture sweeping the world and the idea of African “primitivism” taking hold in Parisian art scene, the Pan-African Congress went forward with the promotion of international black culture, using black creativity as a force for societal change. Blacks were a part of white society, and Pan-Africanism recognized the shared

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<sup>28</sup> Rucker, *A Negro Within the Nation* 40.

<sup>29</sup> Dubois, “Memorandum to M. Diagne,” 225.

<sup>30</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Crance and Co, 1931), 5.

experiences black people anywhere in the world might have with each other. However problematic the stance of the “civilized negro” may be, this allowed for African agency as well as the ability to become “civilized” without having to deny themselves their culture or rights.

The most intriguing and important aspect of the Pan-African Congress and Pan-Africanism was that they took the idea of a shared cultural experience and transformed it into a shared, international political movement. The call on the League of Nations to protect those of African descent when it came to labor or culture shows a transformation. The future of black people relied on Delany-esque isolation and freedom from whites; blacks looked to demand their rights. But African Americans, French blacks, and West Indians were not only concerned about themselves, but with blacks all over the globe:

*The League of Nations:* Greater security of life and property shall be guaranteed to Natives; international labor legislation shall cover Native workers as well as white; they shall have equitable representation in all the international institutions of the League of Nations, and the participation of the blacks themselves in every domain of endeavor shall be encouraged in accordance with the declared object of article 19 of the League of Nations.<sup>31</sup>

While the language of this section is clearly focused more on blacks who were living under colonial rule, the same demands could very well be made towards the U.S. government. As the white world was cutting up the black world at the Paris Conference and determining how the post-war world would be, black leaders such as Dubois and Diagne injected Pan-Africanism into international politics. The effect of this was seen almost immediately in the American black press.

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<sup>31</sup> Dubois, “Memorandum to M. Diagne,” 225.

The 1919 congress was a much greater success than the conference of 1900 in regard to coverage. Both everyday people and officials heard black leaders voices and the plans detailed in 1919.<sup>32</sup> Not even two weeks after the congress, *The Crisis* ran an article discussing the state of Africa and democracy. It starts off with a very clear message: “Africa must ultimately be returned to the Africans. They are the best custodians of their lives and ideals. This was the thought developed at the meeting for the Pan-African Movement, held January 6, 1919, at Carnegie Hall, New York.”<sup>33</sup> This was a radical change from the emigration promoters of the nineteenth century and even a step forward from the Pan-African Conference of 1900. It is not a surprise that an idea like this was published in a paper edited by the key figure in the organization of the Pan-African Congress, but even *The Messenger*, a magazine that never hesitated to criticize Dubois, *The Crisis*, and whose founder, A. Phillip Randolph, was a rival of Dubois, found themselves urging an international black community with these congresses.

A segment in *The Messenger* called “Internationalism” touched on the fight of people who been disenfranchised by the British, blacks and whites alike, and related these battles back to the fights of black Americans, which the paper deemed worthy of having on the world stage: “Carry the Negro problem out of the United States, at the same time that you present it in the United States. The mere fact that the country does not want the Negro problem carried to Europe is strong evidence that it ought to be carried there.”<sup>34</sup> There are two ways that this passage can be read. First, it can be read as African Americans bringing their abuses to light by being vocal on the world stage, which would

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<sup>32</sup> Dubois, “The Pan-African Congress,” 25.

<sup>33</sup> “Africa and The World Democracy,” *The Crisis*, February 1919, 173.

<sup>34</sup> “Internationalism,” *The Messenger*, August 1919, 6.



have damaged the reputation of the United States and put pressure on them to treat their citizens with respect. The other way to read this is the expansion of the fight for black rights on two fronts, both in the United States and Europe. Blacks in the European world, while not often subject to the same violence or Jim Crow type policies as African-Americans, were still second-class citizens. The fight was an international one, a Pan-African one, and black activism was leading the charge.

Nineteen years passed between the Pan-African conference and the Pan African Congress, but only two years passed before the second Pan-African Congress was held. The 1921 congress was held across Europe, in Brussels, London, and ending in Paris. The locations were quite deliberate as the congress continued to challenge the state of black people under colonial rule of the host countries, Belgium, Britain, and France. It continued the evolution of Pan-Africanism from a belief that was delegated by “civilized” blacks to a greater understanding and connection between black communities across the world. *The Crisis* outlined their goals for this congress in a bulletin issued to help drum up support for the event, calling for more knowledge about Africa, black leaders from all over the world to participate, and the importance of educating whites about their struggle.<sup>35</sup> Again, the congress targeted the League of Nations, making it clear that the congress was not merely a place for blacks to trade experiences, but also to apply pressure to the white world.

Jessie Fauset covered both the congress and the international response to the 1921 Pan-African Congress. She was the product of the black experience in Paris, studying at the Sorbonne in her youth; later producing multi issue features about France

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<sup>35</sup> “The Second Pan-African Congress,” *The Crisis*, July 1921, 120.

for *The Crisis*. Fauset was able to drive the points of the congress home to the readers of the magazine in an almost poetic way: “What can be more fascinating than learning first hand that the stranger across the seas, however different in phrase or expression, yet knows no difference of heart? We were all one family in London.”<sup>36</sup> Differences were not ignored or glossed over between an African American and a person coming from colonial France or anywhere else, but the point is driven home is that their differences fail in comparison to what they have in common – the black experience.

Fauset was also able to uplift the colonized lands in the Congo while directly confronting the abuses of colonialism:

After we had visited the Congo Museum we were better able to understand the unspoken determination of the Belgians to let nothing interfere with their dominion in the Congo. Such treasure! Such illimitable riches! What a store-house it must plainly be for them. For the first time in my life I was able to envisage what Africans means to Europe, depleted as she has become through the ages by war and famine and plague.<sup>37</sup>

Here Europe is portrayed as a selfish thief who, after ruining their own lands, must turn to Africa for sustenance. This portrayal of Europe was not surprising for African Americans to read, but what is important to note is the glorification of the Congo. The Congo had the economic resources to lift up a war torn Europe, making it quite clear why Belgium had little interest in ending their colonial rule. What comes through most clearly, however, is what Fauset saw as the potential power a black nation might have had if it was able to throw off the chains of their colonial masters. Fauset’s article made The Congo out to be a wondrous place capable of uplifting the old empires of Europe but because they were denied their freedom the region was unable to flourish. The creation of Pan-Africanism

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<sup>36</sup> Jessie Fauset, “Impressions of the Second Pan-African Congress,” *The Crisis*, November, 1921, 12.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-4.

had to be sold to the people, which is what Fauset was doing. The struggle for rights was a global one, and a fight that must be targeted at every opportunity wherever a problem arose. As will become even clearer with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the idea of Pan-Africanism was growing.

Pan-Africanism was not just a concept that had to be sold to blacks worldwide, but it had to reach whites, as well, if it hoped to have an impact on the international stage. Historian Walter Rucker detailed the congress from Dubois's point of view as he praised the amount of pressure that these congresses placed on the white world through media coverage.<sup>38</sup> Dubois acknowledged this later in his life, but the fact was not lost on him or the other members of *The Crisis*. In December 1921, Fauset compiled papers from all across Europe in her piece "What Europe Thought of The Pan-African Congress." The coverage was more expansive than previous reporting done on the conference in 1900, and Fauset primarily printed the positive opinions. Taking excerpts from papers, her piece reads more like propaganda than reporting, such as in this quote from the London paper *Public Opinion*: "A remarkable exhibition of race consciousness and a revelation of the intellectual and moral development of the Negro."<sup>39</sup> This was likely was the goal, and nuanced pieces about the idea of Pan-Africanism were not of interest to *The Crisis*. The objective was to sell Pan-Africanism to black Americans using any means necessary to do it:

Black men have something to contribute to the world thinks London  
*Challenge* "The Second Pan-African Congress which has now concluded  
its sessions, is an event of the gravest import. The growth of a body of

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<sup>38</sup> Rucker, *A Negro Within the Nation*, 44.

<sup>39</sup> Jessie Fauset, "What Europe Thought of the Pan-African Congress," *The Crisis*, December 1921, 63.

public opinion among peoples of Negro descent, broad enough to be called Pan-African, is one of the signs of the times.<sup>40</sup>

The Congress was obviously important, even Europeans saw that, but it was also a clear sign of where the world was heading. Pan-Africanism represented a bright future for those with a dark past, and the black press made certain to emphasize how essential it was to the progression of rights for blacks worldwide.

The biased coverage of the Pan-African Congress by *The Crisis* was quite apparent. Dubois was the editor of the magazine, an important figure in the NAACP, and the secretary of the Congress, though his position may have provided a skewed view on the importance of the congress and its reception. Even with this bias, the idea of Pan-Africanism was prolific and *The Crisis* was not the only publication to cover the Congress or news in black areas of the world. *The Messenger*, while still solvent, covered the Congress, and the black experience with great interest. The *Pittsburgh Courier* employed some of the same writers as *The Crisis*, most notably, J.A. Rogers, and was no stranger to the events in Liberia, Haiti, and Ethiopia, all symbolic places of black freedom. *The Baltimore Afro American* promoted the idea of Pan-Africanism, as well, and even employed Langston Hughes for a period of time in the 1930s. *The Afro American* often reserved space on its front page for the goings on in Africa or the Caribbean, and from 1915 to 1934 the paper put news out of Haiti on the front page as well.

Haiti and Liberia were active in the African American mindset because of the interest from some emigrationists and because they were two black nations that remained

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 63.

free from the scourge of colonialism, even as they both experience white interference. The United States occupied Haiti after the murder of the Haitian president in 1915 and did not leave until 1934.<sup>41</sup> Some African Americans were in favor of intervention by the United States, but when the United States failed to leave in what was considered a timely manner, their opinions began to sour against this military action.

*The Crisis* deemed the occupation to have “absolutely failed” because it did not improve the lives of the Haitian people. Reports of rape, murder, and the exportation of racism from the United States, similar to the charges in France, were the only things that *The Crisis* and other African American publications noted in their stories.<sup>42</sup> African American publications went as far as praising Haitians who attacked American soldiers as freedom fighters, comparing them to African American heroes such as Nat Turner.<sup>43</sup> *The Messenger* compared the incursion into Haiti with England’s involvement into Ireland: “American Imperialism is veritably running riot in Haiti...The case of Haiti ought to be ample proof to the Negro that they can not free their races in Africa or Haiti until they are able to secure a large measure of freedom for workers, black and white, in America and England.”<sup>44</sup> While *The Messenger* took a more international approach, not limiting itself to the discussion of race, the spirit of the Pan-African connection remained clear. The United States was the villain once again, not only engaging in imperialism but also exporting racism to Haiti, just as they were accused of doing in France. Haiti

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<sup>41</sup> Henry Lewis Suggs, “The Response of the African American Press to the United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934,” *Journal of African American History*, vol. 87 (2002): 70.

<sup>42</sup> James Wheldon Johnson, “Truth of Haiti,” *The Crisis*, April, 1920, 223.

<sup>43</sup> Suggs, *The Response of the African American Press*, 72.

<sup>44</sup> “Haiti,” *The Messenger*, March 1922, 368.

remained very much in the news while the Congresses were nurturing this connection between blacks of the diaspora.

Liberia was important symbol for the Africa American community, as well. The country did not have the prestige of Haiti, nor did it receive the same abuse, but it was still seen as a place of great opportunity. *The Crisis* called for African Americans to take this connection even further: “If ever, for colored Americans to make vital connections with the same uncontaminated Africans – contact which would be a real education for both parties...the fact that for colored American, *Liberia is one great opportunity.*”<sup>45</sup> Liberia represented hope, similarly to how Fauset described the Congo; it was what could be if people of color united, but it was not an idyllic place. The Liberian economy often struggled, which caused some African Americans to call on the United States for loans.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, there were great fears that Liberia would turn into Haiti and be abused by American capitalists, or that the country would go the same way as the rest of Africa and become another European colony. While the Congresses were taking place an ocean away, African Americans remained engaged with news stories from nations that were a part of the diasporic community.

The commitment of the black press to support of black nations remained strong as noted by historian Baiyina W. Muhammad: “The *Afro American* encouraged political and economic ties between Black people in the Diaspora with Blacks in the U.S, In the case of Ethiopia, there was a push by the *Afro American* for Blacks to join political

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<sup>45</sup> Plenyong Gee Wolo, “What of Liberia,” *The Crisis*, September 1918, 220.

<sup>46</sup> “‘The Crisis in Liberia’ By a Former Resident,” *The Crisis*, March 1923, 210.

organizations that were developed to provide support to Ethiopia.”<sup>47</sup> The importance of Ethiopia to African Americans will become clearer in upcoming chapters, but before getting to Ethiopia, specifically this excerpt shows the importance of the ideas of Pan-Africanism that were promoted at the Congresses and in *The Crisis*. Equally, it shows that Pan-Africanism and the international struggle for black rights were not restricted to those with a vested interest in the success of the congress.

There were two more congresses during the interwar period, one in 1923 and the other in 1927. The one in London and Lisbon in 1923 was rather small, possibly an attempt to try and keep the two year schedule that the Congress had been running on, though *The Crisis* blamed the French delegates for not drumming up enough support.<sup>48</sup> The one in 1925 was going to be held in the West Indies but fell through due to difficulties related to transportation. The Congress in 1927 was held in New York City and continued to show the growth that started back in the nineteenth century with demands for a voice in government, land, education, and the proper treatment of civilized men.<sup>49</sup>

A recap of all four congresses in the interwar period was published in October 1927 and detailed who demanded what for each area. From British Africa, to French Africa, to the West Indies, to the United States, the demand for blacks rights was officially a seamless international one and by this point. Pan-Africanist rhetoric included warnings about the upcoming conflict between Ethiopia and Italy: “We demand the continued independence of *Abyssinia*, coupled with international movements on the part

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<sup>47</sup> Baiyina W. Muhammad, “The Baltimore Afro American’s Consciousness Agenda, 1915-1941,” *Journal of Pan African Studies* vol. 4, no. 5 (2011): 12.

<sup>48</sup> “The Pan-African Congresses: The Story of a Growing Movement,” *The Crisis*, October 1927, 263.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 263-65.

of philanthropists to bring modern education to the people of the land and modern industry planned for the benefit of Abyssinians and not simply for European trade.”<sup>50</sup> Pan-Africanism was growing and the effects of it were seen during the outbreak of the Second Italo-Ethiopian war. Ethiopia was to be the place where these new beliefs would be put to the test by both blacks and whites alike.

The 1927 Congress was the last of the Interwar period, perhaps because the Great Depression put many projects on hold. The next Congress did not come until after World War II in 1945. But even so, the idea Pan-Africanism was still examined and promoted in the years when the congress wasn’t held. Many participants of the Pan-African Congress preached black unity, yet struggled to shed many white ideals that were used to keep the black race subjugated. In 1933, Dubois laid down a shift of thought in regard to the idea of Pan-Africanism in an article title “Pan-Africa and New Racial Philosophy”

All that has been said about economic readjustment in America for American Negroes can be said with even more emphasis concerning the Negroes of the world and concerning the darker peoples... It is, therefore, imperative that the colored peoples of the world, and first of all those of Negro descent, should begin to concentrate upon this problem of their economic survival, the best of their brains and education. Pan-Africa means intellectual understanding and co-operating among all groups of Negro descent in order to bring about at the earliest possible time the industrial and spiritual emancipation of the Negro peoples.<sup>51</sup>

Here Dubois signals a shift from a heavy focus on the idea of cultural creations and toward the material needs of every black person. Gone were the ideas of the “civilized” black, but now was the idea of the black who was important and needed protection because they were a person.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 264. As stated in William R. Scott’s *The Sons of Sheba’s Race*, Ethiopia often went by the name Abyssinia until after World War II. See William R. Scott, *The Sons of Sheba’s Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1941* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>51</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, “Pan-Africa and New Racial Philosophy,” *The Crisis*, Nov. 1933, 262.



African Americans' ideas of blackness were not thrust upon them during the interwar period, but rather their connection to the continent that their ancestors were ripped from was impossible to break. There were those who looked at blacks around the world and to majority black lands and sought to both raise up the black race on the international stage and help blacks free themselves from American racism. With the rise of the Pan-African Congress, the connection to international blackness for African Americans only increased in importance and scope. From the emigrations of the nineteenth century, to the uplifting politics of civilized blacks, black Americans' ideas of Pan-Africanism had travelled a great distance, even if there was still work to be done in shedding white colonial ideas of civilization.

However, it was the African-Americans' newfound deep connection with Europe, including its black citizens, which allowed for this growth of Pan-Africanism to truly take off. With work from Dubois and Diagne, the Pan-African Congresses became international news stories that were vital not just for subjugated blacks, but also the whites who allowed this subjugation. While ideas of a "civilized" man still plagued much of the talk around the congresses, the assertion for rights and a place in a world that was defined by whites, for whites was a major aspect in an effort to create a community among the black race. Both blacks and whites took notice of these Pan-African ideas, and the 1930s would put this emerging force of blackness to the test as white nations continued to flex their muscles on the international stage. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia gave blacks around the world a fresh rallying point where Pan-Africanism took center stage, going from activists in meeting rooms in Europe to activists on the streets of New York City.



### **Chapter 3: Ethiopian to African Americans**

While African Americans were discovering how far the color line in Paris could be pushed and challenging the status quo of colonialism, back in the United States blacks were getting involved in the Pan-African movement. This idea of Pan-Africanism needed symbols to latch onto, and many African Americans latched on to nations like Liberia and Haiti, but most intensely with Ethiopia. African Americans' connection to Ethiopia goes back to the eighteenth century, when slaves in the United States sought to recreate a history that was taken from them, and in the twentieth century this connection to the free African nation only grew, which was often played out in the press. The growth of Pan-Africanism and the expanding global consciousness of Africans Americans increased when Ethiopia's sovereignty was threatened by white imperialism. African Americans saw the fears they had of European colonization of the few independent black countries realized in Ethiopia, and when Italy invaded the country in 1936, there was an outpouring of support for the African nation from many in the African-American community.

Many of the same figures who made their name or simply gained understanding of the wider world in Paris found themselves engaged in the world's latest event. Josephine Baker and Langston Hughes, who both had their own experiences in Paris, often on the opposite ends of the spectrum, spoke out about Ethiopia, and because of their celebrity, were heard. Baker supported the Italians, and Hughes, like many other African-Americans, sided with the Ethiopians. Hughes connected the struggle of African Americans against a white world with the struggled face by African nation. Those African-Americans who agreed with the view of the larger black community mobilized efforts to help the Ethiopians in their struggle against imperial Italy, which often put them

at odds with their white America. The black press played an important role in the continuing connection between African Americans, Europe, and Ethiopia.

While the Pan-African Congress was talking place in Paris and artists were engaging and coming to terms with the different types of blackness in the world, black America was still infatuated with Ethiopia. The greater connection to Europe after World War I forced African-Americans to reconcile their blackness with others, and their love of the Ethiopian civilization was firmly cemented. It is likely that as the idea of Pan-Africanism slowly spread across segments of the black community that the connection they felt with the ancient civilization only grew. As one of Africa's oldest nations, and of its few remaining free countries, African-Americans, from figures like Fredrick Douglass to W.E.B. Dubois, continued the fight for rights both for Ethiopians and blacks at home. From articles, fundraisers, to even riots and the battlefields of Ethiopia, the way African Americans connected with the outside black world was changing from the civilizing mission of the past to the quest for freedom from white supremacy and white rule. The war for Ethiopia became similar to the battle against lynching or segregation in the United States; African Americans related to and reacted against any form of oppression against fellow members of the black race.

### **3.1. Pre War Interest**

The attraction of African-Americans to Africa was nearly as longstanding as the United States, and their fascination with one of the continent's most ancient civilizations was even older. In the 1700s blacks in the United States used the term *Ethiopian* interchangeably with *black*, clearly reveling in the early developments of a black identity and even a pan-African culture. Martin Delany was drawn to this history, claiming that

his Masonic lodge was “born on the sacred soil of Ethiopia.”<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia became a symbol for a people who had their history stolen from them. While whites in the United States were able to take pride in their new nation or hold on to their old heritage, blacks and future African-Americans took to Ethiopia for pride, cementing their stolen past in a civilization older than their own.

As the United States defined who and who was not a full citizen, essentially defined by who and who was not white, newly arriving Europeans were coming together to affirm their cultures within the concept of their new of a nation. African-Americans attempted to do the same in the nation of their birth, a place where they were not accepted as full citizens. Finding a connection to Ethiopia, which had been held up to almost mythical standards became vital to finding a place in the world.

Early on in African-American history, the connection to Ethiopia was a religious one. The country became an almost mythical place, it was a place where the promised land could be found. It was a free nation, a free Christian nation, and one free from imperial white rule.<sup>2</sup> Wilson Moses defined W.E.B Dubois love for Ethiopia as “Ethiopianism”;

In summary, Ethiopianism may be defined as the effort of the English-speaking Black or African person to view his past enslavement and present cultural dependency in terms of the broader history of civilization. It serves to remind him that this present scientific technological civilization, dominated by Western Europe for a scant four hundred years, will go under certainly – like all the past empires.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 13, 19.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Shack, *Ethiopia and Afro-Americans: Some Historical, 1920-1970*. Phylon, vol. 35, no. 2 (1974): 142-155, esp. 145.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson J. Moses, “The Poetics of Ethiopianism: W.E.B Du Bois and Literary Black Nationalism,” *American Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3 (1975) : 411-426, esp. 416.

This definition was applied to Dubois, but should not only be limited to one man. Rather this feeling can be applied to many African Americans who were also looking to the outside for hope of a new world, one where white domineering nations did not hold the power. Ethiopia was a symbol of black hope and proof that this hope was not misplaced. Ethiopia had once been a great civilization and still garnered respect, and because of this many African Americans were drawn to it. They envisioned a world where equality would replace the white supremacy that seemly controlled everything.

Fredrick Douglass found Ethiopia to be a useful tool when trying to break down racial barriers and the racism he faced. On many occasions Douglass told the world about the contributions blacks made to the civilizations in Egypt and Ethiopia. He tried to reason with people on a cultural level and tried to show people that Europe's power was temporary and fleeting: "the arts, appliances and blessings of civilization flourished in the very heart of Ethiopia, at a time when all Europe floundered in the depths of ignorance and barbarism."<sup>4</sup> Ethiopia was a tool, but the effectiveness of the tool was limited. As a tool it failed to move the white majority of the United States away from their racist beliefs. Douglass saw the importance of the free African civilization for blacks in the United States, and was reinforcing connections that were already being made among the wider population. If a flourishing black society could exist thousands of years ago and centuries before Europe became "civilized," why couldn't it exist now? It also challenged the idea of world progression – other civilizations had existed in the past, and this white dominated world was not necessarily progress, but rather a temporary stage. This idea challenged the foundation of a world that was permanently ruled by white supremacy.

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Douglass, "The Abilities and Possibilities of Our Race" (1865), in *The Voice of Black America*, ed. Philip Sheldon Foner, (New York: Capricorn Books, 1975), 331.

Douglass tapped into ideas of Pan-Africanism without explicitly using the term. However, he did not look to black nations for unity and power, but more for the individual. Blacks in the United States deserved to be free, deserved a chance to prove themselves, and deserved a spot in the United States not only because they were human beings, but because they were from a race of quality. Slaves were the descendants of a people who created advanced civilizations that rivaled the Greeks and built structures that matched the Romans, and there was the underlying belief that as those ancient slave societies had fallen, Eurocentric white dominance could not last forever. Perhaps an elite black civilization could rise and flourish once again.

### **3.2. The Response of the Black Press: 1920s & 1930s**

On the eve of the twentieth century Ethiopia became more than a mythical place to African Americans, when it was forced onto the world stage by the invasion of Italy. Much like the Germans, the Italians were late to the game when it came to colonization. Italy left the 1880 Berlin Conference gaining very little territory; however, ten years later, they took advantage of weak rulers and disorganization in Eretria and a portion of Somalia that was called Somaliland and subjugated these territories to create their first African colonies. Next, Italy turned inland and set their sights on Ethiopia. In 1896, the Italian parliament voted to invade and annex one of the only free African nations. However, this decision turned out to be a costly and embarrassing mistake.

In the February 1935 issue of *The Crisis*, J.A Rogers details Italy's disaster when the their military commenced their invasion: "No sooner had the Italians shifted to the valley than the 120,000 Ethiopians engulfed them. Packed tightly in the narrow pass, and almost unable to use their arms, the Italians were speared like sheep. Less than 3,000 of

them straggled back into Italian territory.”<sup>5</sup> The victory itself was not as dominant as Rogers made it out to be, but that did not diminish its symbolic importance.<sup>6</sup> An African nation had defeated a European nation on the battlefield, putting a dent in the idea of white supremacy and giving more support to those who subscribed to the idea of Ethiopianism. While it is difficult to judge the importance of this event through the black press, the fact that Ethiopia held an important place in black history prior to this war, as well as its growth after the war, makes it very likely that the Ethiopian victory over the Italians was more than a battle between two nations, but a battle between two races.<sup>7</sup>

Ethiopia would become a far bigger symbol when Italy, under the control of Mussolini, returned to show their newfound power and to get their revenge. As Pan-Africanism was being refined and revitalized, and more nations and black voices were brought into the fold, Ethiopia remained an important symbol. Both purveyors of old and more traditional high culture in *The Crisis* and new figures, such as Marcus Garvey, found Ethiopia useful, but in very different ways. *The Crisis* continued in the steps of Douglass and followed a more traditional line, which meant directly related to the white structures that defined culture itself. Garvey, on the other hand, wanted to shake those structures to the very core, and his actions were geared to subvert many traditions set in place by European/American standards.

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<sup>5</sup>J.A Rogers, “Italy over Abyssinia,” *The Crisis*, February 1935, 38.

<sup>6</sup> Scott, *Sons of Sheba’s Race*, 30. It was true that the Italians were defeated quite handily by the Ethiopians, but the number killed was most likely exaggerated. While the Italians were forced to retreat from Ethiopia, they were still able to hold on to their other colonies in neighboring Eritrea and Somaliland.

<sup>7</sup> The black publications that I have looked at all start well into the twentieth century, so going back to see what the community thought about this event is difficult. It is possible that the Ethiopian victory played out much like Japan’s victory over the Russians on the eve of World War I, as in a victory for non-whites everywhere was a boost to their cause in fighting for equal rights and for their place in the world.



It should come as no surprise that a publication that had Dubois as the editor adopted similar stance as Fredrick Douglass when it came to Ethiopia. An article in the October 1921 issue of *The Crisis* dives into the history found on an archeological dig in Africa. Every part of the article is geared toward the idea of proving the value of black culture through its history and emphasizing the importance of the civilization. The dig was led by Harvard archeologists, which instantly legitimized the importance of the findings. The archeologists found the pyramids of Nuri and the tombs of kings and queens, generously referred to as “forgotten Ethiopians.”<sup>8</sup> The pyramids are located in the Sudan, home to the old Nubian civilization.

The article goes on to mention the gold deposits Ethiopians controlled and the tools that were discovered, including arrowheads from 900 B.C. Also emphasized is their connection with other African civilizations, and beautiful decorative jewelry. The ending paragraph highlights the importance of this finding:

A number of pieces of Egyptian jewelry from royal tombs at Nuri and El-Kur’un are exquisite in workmanship. The beads of amethyst, carnelian and blue glazed quartz, from Kerma, might fittingly be displayed among prize ornaments of a modern jeweler, rather than among buried treasures of sleeping goldsmith of centuries ago.<sup>9</sup>

In a piece called “Ethiopian Art,” it ends with a discussion on Egypt and an importance placed on material goods. The use of *Ethiopian* as a term to refer to Africans or black culture as a whole is in play here, as well as the symbolic importance of Egypt in many white civilizations. Importance was placed on the material constructions because that was

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<sup>8</sup> These pyramids are located in the Sudan and are culturally Nubian. The Greeks referred to the Nubian or Kush people as Ethiopian.

<sup>9</sup> Maud Cuney Hare, “Ethiopian Art,” *The Crisis*, October 1921. 259.

what Europeans had used to deny non-whites of their history, as well as emphasize the importance of their own white heritage.

Like Douglass before, this article attempts to place African culture at the forefront of civilization. The forgotten findings were not only great for the people of the past, they mirrored the greatness of African civilizations, and remained relevant even in the 1920s. The claim that the jewelry was better suited in a modern jewelry store places Africa, Ethiopia, and blackness at the front of civilization. Whites might have their respectable institutions now, but blacks have been there before. They created greatness that the world had forgotten, but they would return to it because it was in their blood.

Marcus Garvey challenged the norms and traditions of society while telling blacks to be unified and to be proud. His ideas upset whites who had become nervous about seeing proud blacks reject their lot in life, even if it were just through ostentatious dress, but they also created animosity between Garvey and Dubois and the NAACP. Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement, in addition to his brash and outgoing teachings, went against Dubois and the crowd who were trying to earn, or prove, the worth of their race in the white world. Garvey had little connection with Paris but still found his belief in a Pan-African world. Regardless of the differences between Garvey and Dubois, Garvey used the idea of Ethiopia in a similar way to those who came before him.

He used the idea of Ethiopia as a places of regeneration for the black race like religious preachers before him and the term *Ethiopian* became enter changeable with *African*. William Scott credits Garvey for the most effective use of Ethiopianism: "But, unlike Blyden, Hayford, and Du Bois, Garvey was successful in transforming Ethiopianism, fused with borrowings from secular pan-Africanism, into a mass

movement in the form of the Universal Negro Improvement Association.”<sup>10</sup> The UNIA was the other half of the coin when it came to the revival of pan-African and Ethiopianism in the country.<sup>11</sup> Garvey’s adoption of Ethiopia in the fight for rights shows how widespread and important the free African nation was becoming to African Americans. This feeling only grew as the Italy set their sights on Ethiopia once again.

The importance of Ethiopia in regard to African-American ideas of place and race in the world only grew in the 1920s and 1930s, in part because of Garvey and the UNIA, but also because of the Pan-African Congress, black press coverage, and African American celebrities taking interest in the nation. The continual revisiting of conflict between Italy and Ethiopia only served as a way to keep the African nation in the news and further bring this once mythical place out of the ethereal and into the daily lives of people.

The Second Italo-Ethiopian war did not start until the spring of 1935, but early threats of war were apparent to those who kept up with the news. In late spring of 1926, nearly nine years before Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, *The Crisis* ran an article titled “Italy and Abyssinia” that detailed the growing danger Italy posed to Ethiopia’s independence: “Italy wants to become more imperial...What Italy wants is Abyssinia, she has wanted Abyssinia a long time.”<sup>12</sup> The article is half informational, updating the readership on the matter at hand, with the other half shaming European nations that seemed ready to ignore this potential imperial conquest. The piece notes that the last time Italy invaded Ethiopia, many in Europe applied sanctions upon them but, his time they seemed all too

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<sup>10</sup> Scott, *Sons of Sheba’s Race*, 21-23.

<sup>11</sup> The other half, of course, is the growth of African Americans through travel to Europe and their relaying of the messages back through the press.

<sup>12</sup> “Italy and Abyssinia,” *The Crisis*, June 1926, 62.

accommodating.<sup>13</sup> The article ends by reporting the troop movements of Italy, and reporting on the defeat of a rebellion in Somaliland, which cemented Italy's place on the horn of Africa while keeping troops near Ethiopia, which they most desired.

The article notes that the only nation "offering any open objection to this high-handed program of theft, lying and slavery is the Soviet Union."<sup>14</sup> If France was the place for people to be exposed to the world, and Ethiopia was an idea of freedom, then the Soviet Union represented a break from the racist imperial nations of Western Europe and the United States. The Soviet Union played a larger role in the lives of African Americans in the 1930s, and some even made their way to the Soviet Union, with most returning with only praise for the nation they perceived as free from racism. The Soviet Union became more important once Americans started entering the Spanish Civil War.

Just as the "Ethiopian Arts" article kept the cultural importance of the nation in the minds of African-American, so did this update on Ethiopia's standing in the world. However, this article removed Ethiopia from the minds of African-Americans and made it more tangible. Ethiopia was now a place in the world that could be helped, and it was becoming a place where Pan-African ideas could be practiced. Once the Italians invaded, Ethiopia become a place where African-Americans could focus their support the unity of the black race, a feeling that had been growing since World War I.

*The Crisis* looked to other publications as a way to continue their coverage of the impending Ethiopian conflict. In November 1933, they republished an article from the *American Mercury* by Joel Augustus Rogers, written under his pseudonym, Jerrold Robbins, titled "Americans in Ethiopia." Rogers was a writer who did more than write

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

about Ethiopia from afar. Once the war broke out, he spent five months in Ethiopia relaying news back for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. He covered the war in a very biased, if not blatant propagandistic, way. He often told a “truth” that always favored the Ethiopians and did so with official communications from the Ethiopia government.<sup>15</sup> The article reiterates many of the same points as the article “Italy and Ethiopia” from the 1926 issue of *The Crisis*.

The willingness of Europeans to disregard the agency of African nations was on display once again, but this article is different because it brings Americans, both white and black, into the discussion. Ethiopia had been slowly growing from an almost mythical place of hope for African-Americans to what was now becoming reality, in a similar way that France had grown from a fairy-tale mentioned by only the privileged few to a normal part of everyday African-American life. But black Americans were not the only ones now taking a look at Ethiopia; unfortunately, with the arrival of white America came their brand of racism.

In their dealings with Ethiopians, white Americans were just as patronizing and conniving as the Europeans. Rogers notes that despite the fact that Ethiopians would have been subjected to the same racial discrimination as blacks in the United States or England, whites from these countries tried to convince Ethiopians that they were not black, but rather descended from Europeans.<sup>16</sup> The exploration of blackness reveals interesting and complicated points of view:

Abyssinia is really a hodge-podge of some forty races, but all show a pre-dominant Negroid Strain. The Emperor is one of the lightest-colored of the

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<sup>15</sup> Jinx Coleman Broussard, *African American Foreign Correspondents: A History*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 97.

<sup>16</sup> J.A. Rogers, “Ethiopia 1933,” *The Crisis*, November 1933, 251.

Abyssinians...yet an American who once saw him escorted down the Champs-Elysees demanded: 'Why is all this fuss being made over a common nigger.'<sup>17</sup>

Even in the western capital of acceptance, Paris, a light-skinned emperor of a free nation was nothing more than a common black man. Blackness here is a dominating, uniting, and a reducing quality. Ethiopians may not have been "totally black," but it was a trait that was most apparent to whites, and one that African-Americans wanted to see, as well. Ethiopians may have been a diverse group, but it was their blackness that the white world saw, and it was blackness that African-Americans latched on to in an attempt to create a bond.<sup>18</sup>

As "a hundred or so" African-Americans made their way to Ethiopia, they told the people they met there of the conditions that black people had to endure in the United States, and Abyssinians and Egyptians alike were shocked.<sup>19</sup> Some wondered why blacks in the United States did not rise up and kill the whites that abused them.<sup>20</sup> However, "Aframericans," as Rogers dubbed them, brought more than stories of abuse; they brought their culture. They brought jazz and spirituals, movies and cabarets, as well as hair-straightening products and dental care. The influx of African-American culture that Rogers writes about is most likely exaggerated, and though some African-Americans did make their way to Ethiopia, his descriptions sound more like Paris than Addis Ababa. Also interesting to note one of the aspects of African-American culture traded with

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> This worldview did not always mesh with the way the Ethiopians saw themselves. Ethiopians were African but many did not consider themselves part of the Negro race. They had their own culture, one that was not dominated by white nations who applied their racial ideas and made them the standard. This is something that will be touched on in greater detail later on.

<sup>19</sup> Rogers never goes into great detail about the African Americans who worked in Ethiopia, only saying a hundred or so and vaguely alluding to a doctor and a missionary who worked for the previous emperor, Menelik.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 251.

Ethiopians was the act of straightening hair, a practice of becoming more “civilized.” Regardless of Rogers’ often vague reporting, as the Second Italo-Ethiopian loomed, the connection between African-American and Ethiopians would continue to grow. The scope of the connection was growing from spiritual to racial, and the conflict would cause many African-Americans to view this conflict as more than a racial battle, but also a political fight against fascism.

The distrust of African-Americans toward fascism was not something entirely new. However, the aggression shown by Italy and Germany, as well as their racial nationalism, only increased people’s mistrust of fascism, particularly with their imperial exploits of the 1930s. Yet in June 1923, *The Messenger* warned people about the growing number of fascists in the United States and their similarity to America’s white supremacists. In *The Messenger*, an article about an Italian-American anti-fascist group reports on the damage fascism has done to Italy, “It has ruthlessly wrecked unions, cooperatives, labor, liberal and radical publications in Italy. It will seek to do the same thing here. It is another edition of the Ku Klux Klan.”<sup>21</sup>

The article is a clear example of the African American community’s distrust of fascism and clearly establishes the link between the political ideology and the Italian people. At the height of the Italo-Ethiopian War, the conflict between blacks and Italian fascism spilled over onto American streets as both groups battled for a place in the United States. The comparisons of fascism to the KKK only grew with the beginning of the war in Ethiopia and then even further with the fascist involvement in the Spanish Civil War. As the 1930s continued, the scrutiny of fascism only became more intense.

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<sup>21</sup> “The Fascisti in America,” *The Messenger*, June 1923.

In December 1934, *The Crisis* published a piece entitled “Fascism and the Negro.” Ten months before the invasion of Ethiopia, the magazine warned African-Americans what the future held for them under fascism: “If fascism triumphs in this country, the Negro will become the national scapegoat... Negroes who lift up their voices in protest will be herded off to filthy prisons and concentration camps, there to be killed outright or slowly tortured to death.”<sup>22</sup> It details the problems blacks would face, somehow also predicting the fate of Jews in Germany. Eerily prophetic way, *The Crisis* singled out the then popular fascism as a dangerous new movement that only spelled doom for any minority that crossed its path. They envisioned crackdowns on African American workers, artists, and everyone else in between until ultimately entire populations would have their humanity stripped away.

There was also a comparison of the KKK to fascism. Very little was left up to the imagination, and fortunately there was a way to combat the spread of fascism:

Fascism can be defeated by an alliance of labor and liberal groups with racial minorities... The American Negro, by uniting his strength with his members of the white race who are opposing fascism, will not only preserve the advantages he has already secured. He will find allies who will make his struggle for increased privileges their struggle.<sup>23</sup>

The struggle must be a global one as well, because the threat of white violence in Africa was equally as bad as that in the United States: “However, Italian Somaliland is being converted into an African Mississippi. Under the direction of Mussolini territorial officials, vast cotton plantations are being projected.”<sup>24</sup> The battle against fascism was not just a fight against an aggressive ideology that subjugated those who were not of the

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<sup>22</sup> Harold Preece, “Fascism and the Negro,” *The Crisis*, December 1934, 355, 366.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



right race, but it was the continuation of the fight against racism and for equal rights that African-Americans had been fighting for since the foundation of the United States.

In May 1935, the war that seemed to be coming for decades finally kicked off. No one was surprised as Mussolini had been telling the world for years that Italy would not be “a prisoner of the Mediterranean.”<sup>25</sup> This time, however, Ethiopia was not able to surprise the Italians, as Italy used their colonies as a launching pad. A border conflict at Wal-Wal led to the deaths of 107 Ethiopians and thirty Italians and gave Mussolini an excuse to escalate the conflict and expand the “Italian empire” beyond its European borders.<sup>26</sup> His excuse was much the same as the one Germans would eventually use upon their acquisition of the Sudetenland and the invasion of Poland – Italy needed more room for their expanding population.<sup>27</sup>

The League of Nations and other white powers pretended to hear Ethiopia’s complaint and investigate what really occurred at Wal-Wal, but they were not truly interested. As historian Brice Harris put it, “The Wal-Wal incident, apparently settled after a nine-month delay, had never been anything more than a blind behind which Italy prepared for military conquest.”<sup>28</sup> The League of Nations could not find the support to economically hurt the Italian war effort, and while Italy used airplanes and gas to crushes the Ethiopians on their way to victory, the League of Nations and the United States were left with no cards to play and were rather indifferent, anyway. The official fighting lasted

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<sup>25</sup> Brice Harris, *The United States and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 1964), 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

less than a year, ending in May 1936, but the effect that this conflict had on the Africa was felt a hemisphere away.

In 1936 *The Crisis* revisited the issue of fascism and the Italo-Ethiopian War with a more in depth article called “War and the Negro,” in which Harold Preece drew links between the war and the mistreatment of all black people. With the invasion of Ethiopia only a few months old, he starts the piece with, “The rape of Ethiopia is the rape of the Negro race.” Fascism had begun its attack on people of color, and Preece ties the events in Ethiopia to the experiences of blacks in Cuba, as well as those in Alabama, claiming that war does not help the Negro and to resist the appeal of any sort patriotism.<sup>29</sup>

This war was simply the continuation of the white world’s attack on black existence, and it drove people away from the idea that Dubois had promoted back before WWI: “The Negro people must not be hoodwinked by any specious patriotism into supporting a conflict encompassing their destruction,” which was quite different than “Close Ranks.” In the past, *The Crisis* might have been more forgiving, but war had taught them valuable lessons. The article also alludes to the Paris Peace Conference, one where black representatives were turned away, motivating Dubois and others to create the Pan-African conference. The picture was becoming clear. African-Americans were encouraged to think of themselves not only as black Americans, but as blacks, and they had to assist their brethren across the world because white leaders never would. In 1935 Preece wrote, “Ethiopia can well become a pivotal point in the struggle for the complete emancipation of black peoples.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Harold Preece, “The War and the Negro,” *The Crisis*, November 1935, 331.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

The black press, most notably with *The Crisis*, kept Ethiopianism alive and well throughout the beginning of the twentieth century. However, over the course of the 1920s and 1930s something began to change: Ethiopia became less of an idea and more of a reality. It was now a place where African Americans could actually go and a place where African-American could turn to in the struggle for equality. From the growth of the Pan-African Congress in Paris we get a picture of an Ethiopia that was the battleground for all blacks. The effects of this can be seen outside of the press, from famous artists to the dock worker, many whom voiced their opinions and even tried to get involved in the war effort against Italy. Through organized aid efforts, poetry, and political pressure, African-Americans mobilized to fight the Italians in not just a battle of nation-states, but as part of Pan-African racial liberation.

The emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, called for the League of Nations to look into the Wal-Wal incident but was ignored. However, when it came to the League of Nations and the United States, neither was overly concerned about Italy attacking Ethiopia, a fellow member. This stance can hardly be seen as shocking, considering the rest of Africa was decidedly under the control of other European colonial empires, and anyway, their attention was focused upon the Germans, not on one of the free African nations.<sup>31</sup>

Instead of providing assistance to Ethiopia, Franklin Roosevelt, who was subject to a nation that was not interested in getting involved in another conflict on the other side of the globe, meekly supported world peace.<sup>32</sup> However, the League of Nations as a whole did take action against the invading Italians and applied sanctions on Italian goods,

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<sup>31</sup> Harris, *The United States the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 57.

but stopped short of applying that to oil or a blockade.<sup>33</sup> The importance of a free African country mattered little to the League of Nations and the United States, and their loss of sovereignty was not worth the risk of another conflict. For many African-Americans like W.E.B Dubois, who claimed the failure to act had “killed the faith of all black folk in white men,” the world’s willingness to allow Ethiopia to be conquered by the Italians made them look at the world in a entirely new way.<sup>34</sup>

Ethiopia found little support from the international community. African Americans had very little leverage and power in this matter, and European nations were not overly concerned with another African nation being controlled by a European power, even the Soviet Union, a country whose government often spoke out against the expansion of fascism, failed to come to Ethiopia’s aid. The Soviet Union failed to bring up the issue of Ethiopia at the League of Nations in May 1935, betraying African Americans, view of the colorblind champion against European imperialism. There were also rumors of the Soviet Union selling oil to Italy during the war, which caused a great schism between many African Americans and communism.<sup>35</sup>

However, there was one nation that African Americans and Ethiopians could depend on during this time of need, and that was Japan. The rumor that the Soviet Union had offered material help to Italy hurt them in the African American community, while the rumor that Japan was helping Ethiopia raised the perception of Japan as a symbol of non-white independence. It was true that Japan was Ethiopia’s number one trade partner in the 1930s and that Japanese publications denounced Italy’s aggression, but reports by

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<sup>33</sup> Lester Brune, *Chronological History of U.S Foreign Relations* (New York: Garland, 1985), 718.

<sup>34</sup> William R. Scott, “Black Nationalism and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict 1934-1936,” *Journal of Negro History* 63, no. 2 (1978), 133.

<sup>35</sup> Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter*, 69.

the *Pittsburgh Courier* that Japan was training Ethiopian pilots and providing troops never became anything more than wishful thinking.<sup>36</sup> Even with Japan's involvement being little more than a rumor, it shows the importance of both Pan-Africanism and the belief in an international movement of people of color. While Japan was not part of the African diaspora, it still had symbolic power as a non-white power, and African Americans were still willing to engage with anyone who was seen as standing against white colonial supremacy, even if their actions were no more than rumor.

### 3.3. Artists' Eye on Ethiopia

The Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, who later covered the Spanish Civil War for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, was inspired by the Italo-Ethiopian war in both his life and his work. In 1937, Langston Hughes spoke at the Third United States Congress Against War and Fascism in Los Angeles and decried the discrimination the African-American population faced in the United States and linked it to fascism.<sup>37</sup> For many outspoken blacks in the United States, the crimes perpetrated against their community were nothing less than an attack, than war. Hughes' poetry became common in black newspapers in the 1920s and 1930s, and his first appearance in *The Crisis* was in 1921. In sections from two of his poems, "Air Raid over Harlem" and "White Man," he equates the strife of the black man in Ethiopia with the black man in the United States. In "Air Raid Over Harlem" Hughes writes,

The Ethiopian war broke out last night:  
BOMBS OVER HARLEM  
Cops on every corner

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>37</sup> *California Eagle*, January 17, 1936.

Most of ‘em white  
COPS IN HARLEM<sup>38</sup>

and in “White Man,” he writes:

You have a good time in a big house at  
Palm Beach  
And rent us the back alleys  
And the dirty slums.  
You enjoy Rome –  
And *take* Ethiopia<sup>39</sup>

In these sections from two of his poems, Hughes is quite clear about the connections he saw between what it was to be black in the United States and black anywhere else in the world. In “Air Raid Over Harlem,” Hughes mentions the war breaking out in Ethiopia, comparing the bombing of a nation with the African-American community in Harlem -- both communities have been invaded by outside force, Italy and the police. In the other poem, Hughes compares the plight of blacks in the United States with the glamorous conditions that whites live in and relates these realities to the need for whites to *take* Ethiopia while also enjoying Rome. Hughes reinforced the connection with writers such as Preece and Rogers had made when examining the Ethiopian crisis --the struggle against white racism was an international one that any black person could relate to. Whether with bayonet or billy club, the abuse of white supremacy was not limited to any one nation. The anti-fascist, anti-Italian, and, to some extent, anti-American feelings extended beyond the pages of *The Crisis* and found their way into political conventions and African-American art.

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<sup>38</sup> Hughes, *The Poems*, 242. Hughes, McKay, and other writers were commonplace in the black press throughout the Interwar period, both in terms of coverage and their work.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

This anti-fascist and pro-Ethiopian feeling was prevalent in the African-American community. However, there were those who disagreed with the conflation of all black life across the globe. Singer Paul Robeson saw Italy's invasion of Ethiopia as a problem, but could not elevate their problems above those of others simply because people in Ethiopia were perceived as black, writing, "interested in the problems which confront the Chinese people as well as in those which concern, for example, Abyssinia."<sup>40</sup> Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston, on the other hand, took a more extreme view and claimed to children now having a strong role model to look up to in Mussolini.<sup>41</sup>

The most forceful and differing view came from Josephine Baker. The African-American performer created quite the life for herself outside of the United States, becoming a French darling and marrying an Italian, which helped form her position. In 1935, *The Chicago Defender* wrote, "Josephine Baker, American actress, who is wed to an Italian count, Pepito Abetino, in a statement here (Chicago) Tuesday, said she stands ready to aid the Italian government against Ethiopia."<sup>42</sup> It should not be surprising that in a group as large and diverse as African-Americans that there were people who did not fall in line with the more vocal anti-fascists. Each person who decided against supporting Ethiopia or who supported Italy had their reasons, but this did not deter those who saw the fight for Ethiopia as the fight for the black race all over the globe.

The fact that there were a number of prominent African-American figures coming out as either lukewarm or completely against using Ethiopia as a rallying point for black people on an international stage did not deter those who felt strongly about the

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<sup>40</sup> Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 43.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>42</sup> *Chicago Defender* (Chicago, IL ), October 5, 1935.

issue, nor did the fact that many Ethiopians either did not consider themselves to be part of the “Negro” race or had ever heard of an African-American to begin with.<sup>43</sup> The Second Italo-Ethiopian War, and Ethiopia itself, was a way for African-Americans to unite, express their blackness, and attempt to stop the spread of a white empire from a free nation in Africa.

When African-American support for Ethiopia was at its highest, it was claimed that 50,000 black Americans were willing to sign up and fight for the African nation.<sup>44</sup> Emotions may have been running high, but reality hampered the existence of an African-American regiment in Ethiopia. A fine and jail time awaited anyone who went and fought any endeavor was likely too expensive for the average person.<sup>45</sup> One African-American who did make his way to Ethiopia to fight, who later returned to the United States to aid in the construction of the nation’s air force, was John Robinson. The Mississippi man went to the University of Tuskegee and became the first black man to graduate and teach at Curtiss-Wright flight school. With Curtiss-Wright, Robinson made his way to Chicago where he promoted flying in the black community. According to historian William M. Scott, it was here, in a city where such movements had had success in the past, that Robinson was made aware of the struggle in Ethiopia.<sup>46</sup> Using contacts from his days in

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<sup>43</sup> Scott, *Sons of Sheba’s Race*, 189-90. A small number of African Americans immigrated to Ethiopia before the war, often for brief periods of time. Many Ethiopians rejected the term “Negro” for themselves and had negative connotations with the term. Instead, they considered themselves a Hamitic people. However, the vast majority of Ethiopians were isolated from the debate surrounding this identity, nor had they ever interacted with a white or “negro” person who was not native to Ethiopia.

<sup>44</sup> Scott, *Sons of Sheba’s Race*, 62.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 65. Not to mention the fact that any African-American communists who wanted to travel and fight lacked the support of the Soviet Union, who was quiet on the issue of Italian aggression. This silence was not unheard by Dubois and others, who openly criticized the nation’s apparent betrayal to its ideology.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 73.



school, Robinson got in touch with an Ethiopian who gave word to Haile Selassie that an American pilot was willing to join Ethiopia if war broke out.

When Robinson arrived in 1935, he found the Ethiopian military in a sorry state, and once Italy invaded pilots became a crucial means of communication for the Ethiopian military.<sup>47</sup> Much like J.A. Rogers, Robinson used his proximity to the Ethiopian military to relay information back to the black press. Robinson sent stories back under the name Wilson James for the *American Negro Press*, although, because of his military mission, his stories were often held because of their sensitive nature and did not arrive in America until they were outdated.<sup>48</sup> The man known as the Brown Condor could not delay the inevitable Italian victory, and in 1936, he returned to the United States, where he had become an African American hero. Robinson was an average person trying to survive in an unequal society who then developed a desire to do something more once he was exposed to a world outside of the United States. Robinson is an example of the pull that Ethiopia had for African-Americans, particularly in regard to getting people interested in Black Nationalism and anti-fascism.

Salaria Kea was one of the more extraordinary people to get involved in the fight for Ethiopia. The Harlem native and recent nursing school graduate immediately began working for an African-American hospital, which was, unsurprisingly, not on the same level as the hospital for whites. It was while working in these swarming, underfunded hospitals that Kea crossed path with progressives, radicals, and other left leaning thinkers

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>48</sup> Broussard, *African American Correspondents*, 92-93.

and started to view the world in a broader context.<sup>49</sup> When Italy invaded Ethiopia, Kea and her fellow nurses got involved. Kea “joined groups of Harlem nurses who gathered and sent tons of medical supplies to Ethiopia. She helped organize a seven bed field hospital for Ethiopia’s troops resisting Mussolini’s fascist invaders.”<sup>50</sup> Not only was she one of thousands who contributed to the African-American support of Ethiopia, but just a few months after the war Kea became one of the hundreds who went to Spain to fight for the republic and against Franco. For Kea, the support she threw behind Ethiopia was only the beginning, and the trip to Spain was the next logical step in fighting fascism.

In an effort to aid Ethiopia, protests and charity balls were held and supplies and funds were collected, most of which were organized by just a few groups. The Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, United Aid for Ethiopia, and the NAACP were the most prominent. The Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia (PCDE) was an amalgamation of Black Nationalists, communists, Garveyites, and everyone in between. The PCDE raised money and supplies for the Ethiopian War effort, sending over bandages and other medical materials.<sup>51</sup> United Aid for Ethiopia was encouraged by Ethiopia’s honorary consul-general in New York and was formed with the help of a British born Ethiopian who settled in Harlem, Tasfaye Zaphiro.<sup>52</sup> These organizations helped smaller, pro-Ethiopian groups join forces and create a larger group that toured the country in an attempt to raise money.

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<sup>49</sup> Joseph Brandt, *Black Americans in the Spanish People’s War against Fascism 1936-1939* (New York: Outlook Publishers, 1981), 18.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>51</sup> Scott, *Sons of Sheba’s Race*, 112.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 117.

The NAACP took a more official stance when it came to Ethiopia by protesting Italy's aggression to the League of Nations.<sup>53</sup> Roy Wilkins, secretary of the NAACP and editor of *The Crisis*, made sure that Ethiopia was well represented in the pages of his magazine.<sup>54</sup> As the war slowly approached, the NAACP called on the Soviet Union to take a side and petitioned the White House to reject a neutrality bill that they thought would benefit the Italians.<sup>55</sup> The wide variety of groups and individuals who advocated and assembled for Ethiopia showed how deeply many African-Americans and, in many cases, blacks outside of the United States felt about Italy's further incursion into Africa. While American law and lack of support made it difficult for those who wanted to do more for Ethiopia, both John Robinson and Salaria Kea found a way to be leaders in the fight for Ethiopia.

The support of Ethiopia by African-Americans was the culmination of Pan-Africanist efforts to recover a stolen past. Since African Americans turned to places like Ethiopia to ground themselves, it was no shock that many Italian Americans turned to their roots when they found their heritage being challenged on the international stage. Many Italian-Americans were more than willing to answer the call of their mother nation as it embarked on its imperialistic journey. They came to support Italy in the same way African-Americans supported Ethiopia, which eventually came to a head, resulting in riots in the streets of New York.

The call of Mussolini was difficult for most Italian-Americans to resist, and the cult of his personality seemed to follow his former citizens across the ocean. It was said

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>54</sup> For examples see "Negro and Fascism" and "War and the Negro."

<sup>55</sup> Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 133.

that a picture of Mussolini could be found at nearly every bastion of Italian-American society, from churches to grocery stores to classrooms.<sup>56</sup> They might have been Americans, but the history Italian Americans brought with them found their way into current events and affected their decision-making. This was no accident, as Mussolini wanted to make sure his former citizens were deeply connected to their ancestral home, and the Italian-American press played a key role in this process.

The press fanned the flames of nationalism, and much like those claims that African Americans were signing up to fight for Ethiopia, the same claims were being made in Italian-American newspapers, were enormous and had large circulations, the majority of which were headed by fascists. Historian Fiorello Ventresco writes that, “There were an estimated one hundred twenty-nine daily and weekly Italian-language newspapers in the United States attempting to reach approximately 4,500,000 first- and second- generation Italians.”<sup>57</sup> The Italian-American press promoted those who were ready to “immolate themselves” for Italy, though others were a bit more pragmatic and made their way for to Italy to train and fight against the Ethiopians.<sup>58</sup> The Italian Embassy even encouraged Italian-Americans to volunteer for the military, and it was said that Mussolini was behind this directive.<sup>59</sup>

Rumors of 100 soldiers here or 500 there made their way around in the press, fanning and promoting the connection back to Italy. Italians in the mother country had their press pushing the issue of American support of the war beyond the facts; for

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<sup>56</sup> Fiorello B. Ventresco, “Italian-Americans and the Ethiopian Crisis,” *Italian Americana*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Fall/Winter, 1980), 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race.*, 142

<sup>59</sup> Ventresco, “Italian-Americans,” 14.

example, “the New York correspondent of *Il Corriere della Sera* interpreted American opinion for his Milanese readers. Because of America’s large Negro population and its years of experience with “the primitive psychology of the colored races,” he said, “the United States, more than any other country in the world, could appreciate the reasons for Italy’s policy in Ethiopia.”<sup>60</sup> Clearly not above attempting to exploit racial problems in the United States, the Italian and Italian-American press gave Mussolini and fascism a mouthpiece to speak through.

Much like the numbers for African-Americans that were willing to go fight for Ethiopia, the numbers of Italians who joined the imperial excursion is difficult to find. Italian-American support of the war effort mirrored that of African American support for the Ethiopians. In 1935, a Red Cross campaign raised over \$ 30,000 dollars for their work in Italy. The support manifested in other ways as well, through ceremonies and banquets with the church honoring the Italian military.<sup>61</sup> With Italian-Americans and African-Americans on the opposite sides of the same event, living in close proximity to each other in a place like New York, and with the numbers of those willing to sign up to die for their cause reported in the press, it is no surprise that race riots broke out in the lead up and beginning of the Italo-Ethiopian war.

Historian William Scott documents the battles that raged between the two groups in the 1930s. There were fights after the African-American boxer Joe Louis defeated the Italian Primo Carnera, with African-Americans boasting about the victory of an Ethiopian, using it as a catchall term for any black person. Italian-Americans reminded

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<sup>60</sup> Harris, *The United States and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, 44.

<sup>61</sup> Ventresco, “Italian-Americans,” 18-19.

blacks that the fighting in Ethiopia would have a different result.<sup>62</sup> More fights and riots broke out, only exasperated by Italy's invasion, but the most telling quotes come from local papers and men committed to the cause: "A local paper remarked that 'the first shots of the Italo-Ethiopian War were echoed in New York City yesterday as Negroes and Italians battled in several patriotic skirmishes' .... 'Drive the Italians out of Harlem...The white man is a monster who preys on the black man. We're Ethiopian and I'm proud of it. We must fight the battles of our brothers overseas.'"<sup>63</sup>

Both of these quotes from Scott's work illuminate the conflict between the two groups. In the first quote, the riot echoes the war and is called a "patriotic skirmish," which is extremely telling of the prolific nature of the beliefs in Italianness, and more importantly to this discussion, Pan-Africanism. The article came not from an Italian-American paper or an African-American one, but the *New York Herald Tribune*. This shows the belief of unity with Ethiopians was prolific. Even if the term *Pan-Africanism* was not used, the idea had become a mainstream idea that even white Americans were forced to recognize when dealing with African-American issues in international politics. The second section of the quote came from the *New York Times* as well, which suggests that this idea of black internationalism was spread not just for blacks but also for the white segment of the nation to see. These riots and the coverage of them further show the importance of Ethiopia, the Italo-Ethiopian war, and the idea of heritage for hyphenated Americans.

Ethiopians were not able to shock the Italians or the world by repeating the result of the first Italo-Ethiopian War. The war that began in October 1935 was over by May

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<sup>62</sup> Scott, *Sons of Sheba's Race*, 139.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 140.

1936, with the Italians adding Ethiopia to their colonial holdings in the Horn of Africa. A black sovereign nation may have been lost to a white colonial power, but the African American belief in Pan-Africanism continued to grow. Ethiopia went from a place of myth, an ancient civilization used by blacks to prove that they belonged in the civilized world, to a black civilization that could be actively defended. It went from myth to reality.

With Ethiopia's place in the world threatened, African Americans responded as if it were African Americans themselves who were under attack. In the 1890s, Ida B. Wells took the plight of the African American to Europe, and in the 1930s, African Americans brought the plight of Ethiopia to the United States. The message of Pan-African activism spread through the black press, and the culture of the people who adopted the ideas of Pan-Africanism turned these ideas into action on the streets through protests, riots, and benefits, with the rare traveller making it to Ethiopia to further the cause. What started out as a vague connection between people with similar social status and skin tone became a movement refined by Pan-Africanists in Europe and a movement acted out on the streets of the United States in the name of an African country. It was a movement that could identify the threat of fascism, and one that black people could support no matter where they were in the world.

This spirit of international activism did not fade away once Italy's invasion of Ethiopia was complete; rather, African Americans remained wary of both the Italian imperial project and the growing menace that was fascism. There was one last opportunity for this international activism to take shape and that was in Spain. When the country tore itself in two with the Republican Loyalists on one side and the military

backed by fascist Italy and Germany on the other, the war became more than a struggle for control of Spain. Instead, it became an ideological battleground of the world. African Americans looked to Spain as a place to avenge their fellow blacks in Ethiopia, and as a place to strike out against white supremacy in its latest form of fascism.



## **Chapter 4: The Spanish Civil War**

As geopolitical events, the Spanish Civil War and the Italo-Ethiopian War, apart from Italian involvement in both, had little direct importance to each other. The years of instability in the fracturing Spanish nation were tied to the Spanish-American War and the decline of their empire outside of Western Africa. Spain played almost no role in the lives of white or black Americans during the interwar period, and, for most, it remained relatively obscure, even as the European nation descended into chaos. The politics of the Spanish Civil War may have piqued the interest of royalists in Europe and perhaps black American communists like Harry Haywood, but it was a rather contained affair. This changed once Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union decided to shape the outcome of the war by doing more than taking sides, but by providing supplies, and direct military influence like troops and air support. The world may have taken notice of the war in Spain once Germany and the Soviet Union got involved, but for African Americans, Italy remained fixed in their crosshairs. Italy's involvement in the Spanish Civil War allowed African Americans who felt connected to Ethiopia to exact their revenge against the imperial Italian fascists, continuing their connection to Ethiopia in the Pan-African project.

With the end of the Second Italo-Ethiopian war in May 1936 and the beginning of the Spanish Civil war beginning in July of the same year, Europe remained at war, and African-Americans remained focused on supporting their fellow blacks around the world. Over the course of the Spanish Civil War, around one hundred African Americans made their way to Europe to fight for the Republic against Franco and his fascist supporters.

Langston Hughes, who lived in Paris after World War I, traveled to Spain to cover the war for *The Afro American*. But why Spain? Was the allure of getting revenge on the Italians for their crimes in Ethiopia enough of a reason to go? Yes and no. The thought of striking a blow against the Italians was more than enough for many. A famous quote from Albert Chisholm, a black Spanish civil war veteran, became the title of a book published by the Abraham Lincoln Brigade archives and neatly wraps up what the war meant to many African Americans: “This ain’t Ethiopia, but it’ll do.” However, many looked at a chance to fight in Spain as something more than simply attacking Italy; they had a chance to fight against racism, as well as to strike at the very heart of Europe’s latest racist creation in fascism. They saw fascism not necessarily as a new creation, but rather the continuation or adaptation of the type of racism African Americans had been fighting against for hundreds of years back home. Fascism was Europe’s Jim Crow. African Americans fighting in Spain was the final act of the rise of Pan-Africanism in the interwar period, and many saw it as an opportunity to not only fight for their black comrades abroad, but for blacks at home.

These feelings were not only reflected in the coverage of the war in the black press, but also in the words of those who went and fought. In the United States, saying the wrong thing, being accused of a crime, or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time could get a black person killed. Trying to stay alive was a fight in itself, but in Spain a man could grab a rifle, aim at the enemy, pull the trigger, and believe that he was fighting the same white supremacy that made his life hell back home. The Spanish Civil War was anything but a struggle of American racial politics; rather, it was a struggle of colonial racial politics. The African Americans who protested, raised money,

and fought saw this as a chance to fight racism and awaken a great consciousness all over the globe.

#### **4.1. Spain and Morocco**

In 1936, shortly after Italy had claimed victory in Ethiopia, Spain was divided internally as trouble brewed between the leftist government and the more conservative military. The road to war in Spain was complicated, and prior to the military coup in 1936, three prime ministers were assassinated between 1897 and 1921.<sup>1</sup> Spain was a country split into factions – conservatives, socialists, monarchists, the Catholic Church, anarchists, and any alliances that developed between like-minded groups, which often ended before anyone had a chance to take power. There was a gulf in thought between rural and urban Spaniards, as well, and the declining empire could not continue the status quo.

In the 1936 election a coalition between anarchists, socialists, and moderates known as the Popular Front took control of the country. However, the coalition was short-lived as more moderate members of the alliance were cast aside in favor of the leftist members.<sup>2</sup> The changes enacted by the Front were not always popular, least of all the ones that targeted the military, and, since the early 1930s, even before the Front took power, the government had been reducing the size of the military. In 1936 the military's control over their rights and deployment was reduced, as well. Though the gradual loss of power was not the only reason the military staged a revolt, it created an environment

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 30.

where lashing out seemed like the only option.<sup>3</sup> On July 17, 1936, soldiers in Spain and Morocco marched from their barracks in protest against the government.

For this discussion, a deep examination of the war and the day-to-day politics of the Spanish people is not as important as the often-overlooked people of Morocco. The Spanish soldiers in Morocco gave birth to the Spanish Civil War before it spread to the mainland. The last vestige of the once powerful empire still had a voice in the twentieth century, and General Francisco Franco, leader of the rebellion and eventual dictator of Spain, claimed that Africa was vital to his very existence, once stating, “Without Africa I cannot explain myself to myself or to my comrades in arms.”<sup>4</sup> Besides the obvious emotional effect that Morocco had on the leader of the rebellion, it was where the majority of Spanish troops were stationed. To be exact, thirty-four thousand soldiers were stuck on the African continent until Franco appealed to both the Germans and the Italians to fly his troops over the Strait of Gibraltar.<sup>5</sup>

Morocco was also the place where the rebellion’s leaders drafted the vast majority of their foreign troops, and by the end of the war Franco had used upwards of seventy-eight thousand Moroccan troops to defeat the Spanish Loyalists.<sup>6</sup> The idea that the Moroccans, a people subjugated by a foreign army, would join that same army seems strange, but it was not strictly voluntary. The majority of Moroccans were either tricked,

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<sup>3</sup> George Esenwein, *Spain at War: The Spanish Civil War in Context, 1931-1939* (New York: Longman, 1995), 73.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2005), 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. This move could have quite possibly kept the rebellion alive and led to the eventual victory of Franco. Before this move, and of course the direct military involvement of Germany and Italy, the majority of Spain, including the capital Madrid, was in the hands of the Republic. The introduction of thirty-four thousand battle-hardened troops was a major blow to the government and a boost to the rebellion.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Othen, *Franco’s International Brigades: Adventures, Fascists, and Christian Crusaders in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 35.

coerced, or simply had nowhere else to turn in order to stay alive. Franco and his rebels had no problem lying to the Moroccans and did so nearly at every turn.

Franco and the rebellion claimed that the portion of Morocco that was controlled by the Spanish would be given independence at the end of the war, but this did not happen.<sup>7</sup> At the time, however, with the Spanish Republic's refusal to offer anything as grand as independence, the choice was rather easy for those looking for sovereignty. Franco also employed propaganda against the Republic, claiming that government was full of atheists and communists.<sup>8</sup> While this was not entirely false, the fear mongering the colonial army used against the Republic was the clearest example of hypocrisy. Franco had no intention of granting Morocco independence and was in fact less accepting than the Republic when it came to racial differences. Moroccans were merely a means to an end.

This became quite clear when Spanish rebels told Moroccans that, if they did not join the fight, their families would lose their homes, something not necessarily true, but plausible for people living under foreign military control. But, most directly, the pay that Franco's army offered Moroccans who fought against the Republic was simply too good an offer to pass up. Sebastian Balfour details how well the Moroccan recruits were paid: "Pay rose considerably during the Civil War, and both Legion and the Regulares always earned 50 per cent more than the militiamen of the Nationalist army. In addition, two months' advance pay was pledged as well bonuses in kind such as weapons, sugar, oil,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2002), 272.

and bread for the recruit's family.”<sup>9</sup> While the Spanish army did employ dishonesty to recruit his Moroccan army, there was some agency on the part of the Moroccans themselves. Morocco became an important spiritual icon for Franco and a significant portion of the standing army.

The importance of the Moroccan involvement in the Spanish Civil War is complex, and for the Spanish fighting against Franco, it felt like a foreign army was invading and taking control of a sovereign nation. This, coupled with Germany and Italy playing a direct military role, only added to this unease. It is likely that the influx of Muslim soldiers into a nation where the Reconquista was fought made this struggle more personal for those fighting for the Republic.

#### **4.2. African American Reaction**

The reaction of the majority of Americans to civil war breaking out in Spain was similar to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia; inaction. There was no sizeable Spanish population in the United States that might have been able to stir up support, so for most Americans this quickly became just another war in a far away place. However, the American government quickly ordered an embargo that stopped supplies from going to either the Republic or the rebels.<sup>10</sup> There were also claims by some that the government had made it extremely difficult to get a passport and approval to go to Spain.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 60.

<sup>11</sup> William Pickens, “What I Saw in Spain,” *The Crisis*, October 1938, 319. Especially by 1938, the difficulty of travelling abroad was seen as a direct threat to people's freedom, “This is not to keep Americans free from France and Italian bombs. It has no relation to the safety of Americans; it seems part of the unconscious ‘plot’ of the democracies to run out on all the democracy that is left in Spain, and to aid what they ought to hate: Fascism in Spain.” The hatred of fascism was well established within African-American communities, but this touches on the perceived threat of a weaponized neutrality. Countries like the United States and Britain may have stayed out of the war, just as they and the League of Nations had

war in Ethiopia, for most African-Americans the initial outbreak of war in Spain held no more importance than any other story they skimmed over in the newspaper.

What created international interest and drew people from all over the world to come fight against the Spanish military was the involvement of Germany and Italy.<sup>12</sup> Germany's alliance with Francisco Franco provided an opportunity to test out new military equipment, while Mussolini's involvement gave Italy a chance to flex its muscles further on the international stage. At the peak of Italy's involvement in Spain, there were over 49,000 Italian troops in the country, while Germany contributed more through arms and advisors, though they still had a peak military presence of 1,000 soldiers.<sup>13</sup> More than their military might, however, Germany and Italy brought fascism. It was this continued growth and expansion of fascism that caught the attention of both American communists and African-Americans who had supported Ethiopia in their war against Italy.

African-Americans were already critical of fascism, but it was Italy's actions in Africa that enraged them. Mussolini's decision to join the war in Spain became a catalyst and gave the war a whole new meaning for African-Americans. Langston Hughes gave a speech at the Second International Writers Congress that was published in *The Crisis*, *The Volunteer for Liberty*, and the *Left Review* in the fall of 1937. In the speech, he connected the issues of the war, fascism, race, and African-Americans: "And we see in the tragedy of Spain how far the world oppressors will go to retain their power. To them

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during the Italo-Ethiopian war, but in doing so they were willing to accept the fate of an Italian controlled Ethiopia and, in this case, a fascist Spain.

<sup>12</sup> Not all foreign fighters in Spain fought for the government. A good number of Portuguese and French soldiers fought with Franco's forces.

<sup>13</sup> Payne, *Spanish Civil war*, 136, Esenwein, *Spain at War*, 200.

now the murder of women and children is nothing. Those who have already practiced bombing the little villages of Ethiopia now bomb Guernica and Madrid.”<sup>14</sup> Hughes captured the mood many African-Americans had towards the war in Ethiopia and transferred it to the war in Spain.

As was seen in Hughes’ poetry about the Italo-Ethiopian War, the problems faced by blacks in Ethiopia and blacks in Harlem could be linked through their shared experience of domineering white forces. Harlem to Ethiopia, Ethiopia to Spain, fighting injustices against blacks became truly global, and the fight against authoritarianism became colorblind as African Americans were willing to lay down their lives for the Spanish people. Italy’s continued fascist aggression was a danger to any person who loved democracy and even more of a threat to any person of color.

In the same issue of *The Crisis* in which Hughes’ speech was published, George Padmore, a Trinidadian Pan-African communist, wrote about the potential effect of the growing fascist threat on Africa and the black world. In an article titled “Hitler, Mussolini and Africa” Padmore drew connections between the world’s conflicts, race, and colonialism: “The African Problem has already given rise to serious political repercussions, unleashing the forces of revolution and counter-revolution in Spain, which in turn has intensified class conflicts on the one hand and imperialist antagonisms on the other, all of which are accelerating the danger of World War.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Langston Hughes, *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World and Haiti*, ed. Edward J. Mullen (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977), 94.

<sup>15</sup> George Padmore, “Hitler, Mussolini and Africa,” *The Crisis*, September 1937, 262. “These political events, especially the Abyssinian crisis, have forced large sections of public opinion in Europe and America to realize for the first time the close relationship which the colonial question bears to modern wars.”



The problems of race and colonization that were driven by economic gain were often dictated by race, and with the addition of political ideology, the growth of fascism was at the forefront of the minds of African Americans and the black press. Spain was a result of problems with colonization, racism, and now reckless politics promoted by Italy and Germany. Those directly involved in the Pan-African community saw this and were aware of the new found threat of fascist colonial rule. While the battle may have been lost in Ethiopia, Spain was an opportunity for America, as well as the West Indies, to address this growing threat.

The Spanish Civil War grew in importance within the African American community, and many desired to do more than simply express outrage. Celebrities such as Paul Robeson got involved in the war, throwing their support behind the Spanish Republic. Robeson did not take sides in the Italo-Ethiopian War, but this conflict brought him into the fold:

Every artist, every scientist, every writer must decide now where he stands. ...Through the destruction in certain countries – of the greatest of man's literary heritage, through the propagation of false ideas of racial and national superiority, the artist, the scientist, the writer is challenged...The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for Freedom or Slavery. I have made my choice... the liberation of Spain from the oppression of Fascist reactionaries is not a private matter of the Spaniards, but the common cause of all advance and progressive Humanity.<sup>16</sup>

The use of the term *slavery* shows the level at which people like Robeson were connecting to this struggle. The battle against fascism became a fight African Americans could relate to – the struggle to be free from oppressive authority. Even so, his view was

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph Brandt, "Black VIP's Hail ALB Anti-Fascist Fighters," in *Black Americans in the Spanish People's War Against Fascism, 1936-1939*, ed. Joseph Brandt (New York: New Outlook Publishers, 1981). 39-40,

not a Pan-African one, but an international one. More and more, African Americans were looking outwards, and there were many who saw Spain as an extension of Ethiopia, while others such as Robeson saw the growth of fascism as the main danger; many others held these views.

#### **4.3. Communist Connection**

In the 1930s, the Communist Party USA was a growing group that went from 10,000 members in 1928 to 82,000 members in 1938.<sup>17</sup> The party participated in strikes, protests, and even had a strong connection with the Soviet Union that furthered their involvement and understanding of the party and philosophy. The view of Soviet Union was generally positive in the black press, as the nation held no colonies and preached an ideology that was inclusive and attacked the idea of racism. Throughout the interwar period, as African Americans made their way to Paris to experience life in a colorblind society, they also headed to the newly formed to the communist country to see if all the rumors of equality were true.

Claude McKay was Jamaican, but as with many within Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance community, blackness was the common denominator, not nationality.<sup>18</sup> As noted previously, Claude McKay was one of the figures who saw through France's colorblind myth; his experiences outside of Paris and in regions with more black colonial immigrants made that obvious. However, McKay praised the Soviet Union after his visit in 1923. He saw the revolution as it compared to the black and poor in the United States,

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<sup>17</sup>Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> This was also true of many blacks who went to fight in Spain. The people in Spain were not African-American, but the connection between people in the West Indies and African-Americans was at a level where this distinction was of little value. The diasporic community and the idea of Pan-Africanism, whether defined with that exact term or not, was the general rule.

and he found a society that was accepting. Their leaders recognized black blight, with McKay acknowledging that “Lenin himself grappled with the question of the American Negroes and spoke on the subject before the Second Congress of the Third International.”<sup>19</sup> In the same article, McKay wrote of the Russian workers who stood with African Americans. “The Russian workers,” he wrote, “who have won through the ordeal of persecution and revolution, extend the hand of international brotherhood to all the suppressed Negro millions of America.”<sup>20</sup>

As for McKay himself, he felt no differential treatment: “I was a poet, and that was all.”<sup>21</sup> This was the image of the Soviet Union and communism that was sold to African Americans in the interwar period. There had been a revolution of the downtrodden that was looking to lend a hand anyway it could. This, tied with the fact that a great number of black leaders, including Dubois, Hughes, and McKay, leaned left, meant that many African-Americans who were looking for an ideology to turn to turned to communism.

One of the people who turned to the Communist Party because of the great opportunities it offered was an African-American man named Harry Haywood. While it would be false to assume that the Communist Party, predominately run by whites, was without any racial bias, their acceptance of African-Americans set them apart from the rest of American society. In the 1920s, Haywood became deeply involved in the party and was one of those who made the pilgrimage to Moscow. For him, his political affiliation and action went hand in hand. “Why did I go to Spain?” he wrote, “For me, as

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<sup>19</sup> Claude McKay, “Soviet Russia and The Negro,” *The Crisis*, December 1923, 64.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 116.

a communist, Spain was the next logical step... Spain had become the next item on their agenda, after north China and Ethiopia.”<sup>22</sup> During the war, he was put in charge of appointing commanders and made Oliver Law commander, Law was a fellow communist and African American, who would later gain fame for his actions at the Battle of Jarama.<sup>23</sup> For black communists like Haywood and Law, the Communist Party offered them chances to not only turn their international beliefs into actions but to be treated as equals. With the aid of the Communist Party, African-Americans were able to take their support past the stage of protests and sending supplies extending their beliefs to the battlefield. With the specter of fascism hanging over the republic of Spain, the American Communist Party sprung into action.

The recruitment of soldiers by the American Communist Party made participation in the Spanish Civil War possible. They were able to fill the gap that had previously been missing for those who wanted to fight the Italians in Ethiopia. Not every American who made the trip was a communist, but a great number, around 3,000, had at least some leftist political leanings. While there is no comprehensive record detailing the beliefs and histories of the American members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the documents that are available show that the majority of people came from working class backgrounds and upwards of 70 percent were communists.<sup>24</sup> This was the case for many African-Americans who went to Spain, but for Harry Haywood and others, there was more to the fight than just the battle of communism against fascism. Their politics went hand and

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<sup>22</sup> Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1979), 468.

<sup>23</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 135.

<sup>24</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, 71. Robert Rosenstone, “The Men of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion,” *Journal of American History* 54, no. 2 (1967): 327-338, esp. 331.

hand with their race, and for them the global political battle mirrored the battle for the rights of blacks all over the world.

#### **4.4. The Press During the War**

Another reason why African Americans made their way to Spain, besides the international support that allowed them to do so, was the fact that the country was more accessible. Travelling to Ethiopia in the 1930s was not a journey that was as easy as going Spain, and even if travel was restricted because of the war, one small trip to France and then a journey across the border was all it took to avoid the blockade. Indeed, this was the main route foreigners took to get into the war-torn country. Traveling to the colonial lands that surrounded Ethiopia and then trying to sneak into a country that was much larger and much less developed than Spain would not have struck many as a wise, nor was it an appealing journey to undertake.

One of the African-Americans who did make their way over to Spain through France, albeit legally, was William Pickens. The son of two former slaves, Pickens was an educator and writer and was active in the NAACP. In October 1938, he wrote about his experiences traveling to Spain and about his time fighting as the battles continued to rage. He wrote about the difficulties he had obtaining a legal passport to enter Spain, the neutrality of nations such as France, England, and the United States, and African American soldiers. For Pickens, the story was easy: “Yes, there are American Negro boys in Spain, all honor to those boys! They are making history. Among them are some of the greatest heroes of the war.”<sup>25</sup> But the presence of black Americans performing on the battlefield and uplifting the race through their actions was not the only positive thing he

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<sup>25</sup> Pickens, “What I Saw in Spain,” 321.

saw on his Spanish adventure. As many experienced in France, and a smaller amount in the Soviet Union, Pickens saw a land without racism: “There is no color question in Spain. People are just people.”<sup>26</sup>

Just as absurd as the idea that France was a colorblind nation, assuming that Spain, a nation with a similar colonial past, was a place without racism seems farfetched. Yet, in the mind of an African American, if a nation was not dominated by racism and Jim Crow then it only made sense that that nation was colorblind. The idea that whites in Europe were not willing to segregate, beat, and abuse a person because of the color of their skin astounded many. What else could these people be other than colorblind? Spain, like Ethiopia before it, became a collective fight. “Today these Spanish people...are fighting on the front for popular government – for self-government. It is our fight,” Pickens wrote.<sup>27</sup> While the idea of Pan-Africanism, supporting Ethiopians, and revenge against the Italians galvanized many African Americans, the idea of a people struggling against an oppressive power that was looking to strip away basic rights was a place where they found common ground with the Spanish people.

Several African Americans covered the Spanish Civil War for the press, but few did so with the intensity and commitment of Langston Hughes. The politically involved world traveller covered the war for *The Afro American* from September to December 1937, when he was forced to leave because of a bullet wound. His work for the paper and his poetry examines the factors of the war, fascism, race, and how it related to African Americans back home. One of the ways the importance of the war was sold to people in

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 330.

the United States was the same idea that was passed around France and the Soviet Union – that race was not an issue.

While in Spain, Hughes took note of Spaniards who had rather dark skin, as well as their appreciation of jazz and overall acceptance of racial difference. “All the colored people of whatever nationality to whom I’ve talked in Spain agree,” he wrote, “that there is not the slightest color-prejudice to be found. In that respect, Spain is even better than France...some of the big [French] hotels catering to Americans and English tourists are a bit snooty about receiving dark-skinned guests.”<sup>28</sup> The importance of their darker appearance, their respect of black music, and the fair treatment of African Americans made the decision to support the Republicans in the war against fascism that much easier for those like Hughes.

The message of a racially accepting, black-loving Spain did not only reach American minds through the black press, but also through black literature. Just as Hughes tied the black experience to Ethiopia through poetry, he did it once again with the Spanish conflict. In the last eight lines of his 1938 poem “Postcard from Spain: Addressed to Alabama,” Hughes links the fight for freedom in Spain with the freedom of blacks in the United States:

Folks over here don’t treat me  
Like white folks used to do.  
When I was home they treated me  
Just like they treatin’ you.  
I don’t think things’ll ever  
Be like that again:  
I done met up with folks  
Who’ll fight for me now

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<sup>28</sup> Langston Hughes, “Fighters from other Lands look to Ohio Man for Food,” *The Afro American*, November 6, 1937, reprinted in *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World and Haiti*, 134, originally published in *The Afro American*, 6 November 1937.

Like I'm fightin' now for Spain.<sup>29</sup>

What started as an extension of the Italo-Ethiopian War and as revenge against the Italians for the abuse of their Ethiopian brothers, the Pan-African experiment grew into an international struggle. No doubt the influences of leftist ideals were in play, but what is most notable is the continuation of influence that the European experience had on African Americans. As apparent in Hughes' poem, with the fairer treatment from Europe and the melding of minds at Pan-African Congresses, the experiences of African Americans continued to shape ideas and many of the messages exported across the sea.

Hughes was not the only African American figure to draw connections between the struggle in Spain and the struggle for rights back home. There are a number of African American Spanish Civil War veterans who talked about why they went to Spain and what they were fighting, who will be talked about in the next section. But Hughes was able to interview a soldier during the war, Thaddeus Battle, a student at Howard University. Battle was quick to link the problems at home with the problems in Spain, stating: "Colored college students must realize, too, the connection between the international situation and our problems at home... When we see certain things happening in Europe and Asia that may involve the United States in another world war, then, and only then do we see clearly the need for combating such tendencies at home and abroad."<sup>30</sup> However, some returning soldiers did reiterate the ideas expressed by Battle, that African Americans had to have ideas of global unity in order to combat the problems of the world.

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<sup>29</sup> Hughes, *The Poems*, 253-54.

<sup>30</sup> Langston Hughes, "Howard Man Fighting as Spanish Loyalist," *The Afro American*, February 5, 1938, reprinted in *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World and Haiti*, 142.



Arnold Donowa, who, according to *The Afro American*, was the last African American in Spain, talked about the international struggle playing out in Spain: “I entered the fight inspired by the same sentiments as many others – the threat Fascism held for us in the United States. I have no illusions concerning the danger of Fascism to Negro peoples.”<sup>31</sup> He talks about the importance of the Ethiopian invasion and says that there were other blacks, from Ethiopia and the West Indies, who were fighting for the republic. Members of the diaspora and those from Africa were able to come together to fight for the belief of black unity that had been noticeably growing ever since World War I. Europe still offered African Americans a place of growth, as well as a place to fully engage in activities of liberation. France was a site for expanding knowledge and connecting with members of the diaspora, while Spain was location of violent action against a white colonial world.

However, this romantic battle was not one without complications. African Americans fighting for Ethiopia and against Fascism were forced to fight against Moroccans who were fighting for Franco. Pan-Africanism, which primarily promoted the unity of black Africans, had little issue with including those with lighter skin who lived north of the Sahara.<sup>32</sup> North Africans were colonized and abused in similar ways to those darker people south of the Sahara. How, then, did an African American soldier justify travelling across the Atlantic to fight in another country’s civil war against fellow non-whites? This was that Langston Hughes explored.

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<sup>31</sup> “Found only AFRO in Spain,” *The Afro American*, January 7, 1939. 1.

<sup>32</sup> For many Americans fighting for the cause, the ideas of Pan-Africanism and Internationalism went beyond who was black. There was little hesitation for praising the Japanese when they stood up to a western power, there was slower condemnation when they began to colonize South East Asia. The idea was to use the racial policies of whites against them and for the benefit of people of color, as they outnumbered whites. If they found unity, then power would soon follow.

Hughes relayed the message of an accepting Spain and an international cause against racism in fascism. A key part of this message was his coverage of the Moors, the Moroccans, their relation to the war, and growing international unity. Hughes did this both with his poetry and his journalism. In his poem “Letter from Spain: Addressed to Alabama,” he explores the Moroccan experience in the war as well as the importance of the war:

We captured a wounded Moor today.  
He was just as dark as me.  
I said, Boy, what you been doin’ here  
Fighin’ against the free?

They nabbed him in his land  
and made him join the fascist army.<sup>33</sup>

The use of Moroccan troops only verified the problem of fascist abuse:

Cause if a free Spain wins this war,  
The colonies, too, are free  
Then something wonderful’ll happen  
To them Moors as darks as me  
I said, I guess that’s why old England  
And I reckon Italy, too  
Is afraid to let a workers’ Spain  
Be too good to me and you  
Cause they got slaves in Africa  
And they don’t want’em to be free.<sup>34</sup>

This invoking of colonialism and the brotherhood of darker people with the words “me and you” falls well within the Pan-African spirit.

Even though this was the case, it didn’t matter, as the message could not cross the language barrier, with Hughes writing, “But the wounded Moor was dyin’/And he didn’t

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<sup>33</sup> Langston Hughes, “Volunteers for Liberty,” *The Volunteer for Liberty*, November 15, 1937, reprinted in *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World and Haiti*, 156-157.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

understand.”<sup>35</sup> Spain’s use of the Moroccan soldiers was an abuse of colonialism, and those fighting against this made that connection. Their Moroccan brethren were not fighting for the fascists willingly, and knowing this allowed black Americans to continue to live out the belief of Pan-Africanism.

The Spanish Civil War represented something much more than a struggle for democracy in Spain. It was also a struggle against racism, and a struggle for human rights. Hughes saw how the war in Spain brought people together and connected it back to the United States. Hughes expressed this in his journalism with a message for those back home: “When will we learn to work together like that in America?”<sup>36</sup>

#### **4.5 From the Soldiers**

The majority of the African American Spanish Civil War veterans were not interviewed by Hughes or any other member of the black press, but their views can be seen in retrospect. The immediate effect of those who fought in the war on their communities back home is difficult to ascertain because the beginning of War World II dominated the attention of African Americans, as well as the rest of the world. However many veterans of the Spanish conflict looked back at their experiences well after the war, either through memoirs or reunions, and we can see the uniformity of ideas that existed in the press during the war and how these views continued to linger long after. It was evident well into the 1970s and 1980s that veterans often held on to their Pan-African or internationalist ideals, as well as the belief that they fought against fascism, Italian colonial aggression, and in a war that dictated the future of race.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Hughes, “Fighters from Other Lands,” 156-157.

The African-Americans who fought in Spain wanted to slow the spread of fascism and free the Spanish people, but the reasons behind going to war were often more personal and multifaceted. However, their words carry the weight of their past and the actions of countries around the world. If the entrance of fascism into the Spanish Civil riled up international communists, it was doubly so for African-Americans. With fascism came Italians, the defilers of Ethiopia. For Albert Chisholm, an African-American communist from Washington state, fascists made his choice to go to Spain easy: “I wouldn’t be in Ethiopia, but I’d be fighting the Italians in Spain, striking a blow against fascism.”<sup>37</sup> Chisholm was able to live out a dream of fighting against Italians to protect a free black nation, and though Ethiopia was already taken, doing damage to Italy was the next best thing.

Chisholm was not the only black Spanish Civil War veteran who expressed regret about not being able to help Ethiopians in their second war against Italy. In 1954 Crawford Morgan was brought before the Subversive Activities Control Board and was questioned about his role in the war as a communist. Fresh in Morgan’s mind was Ethiopia, as well as the other reason he risked his life in Spain:

Being aware of what the Fascist Italian government did to the Ethiopians, and also the way that I and all the rest of the Negroes in this country have been treated ever since slavery, I figured I had pretty good idea of what fascism was... I felt if we didn’t lick Franco and didn’t stop fascism there, it would spread over the rest of the world. And it is bad enough for white people to live under fascism, those of the white people that like freedom and democracy. But Negroes couldn’t live under it. They would be wiped out.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Danny Duncan Collum, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: “This Ain’t Ethiopia, but it’ll do”* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992), 145.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

Without directly calling the United States a fascist nation, Morgan calls the United States a fascist nation. Fighting against fascism was not just a political standpoint, it was also fighting a racist and oppressive system that put a free black nation in chains. It was a way to fight against a system that abused non-whites in a nation that supposedly stood for freedom and democracy.

White supremacy, which some perceived to be fascism, was a target for these soldiers. Frank Alexander, who was half Sioux and half African-American, thought his actions could change the daily reality most blacks faced back home: “I thought the American people would learn much faster when America became involved in that struggle, that they would wise up to the problems that were here.”<sup>39</sup> Alexander hoped that his fight, as well as the fight of others, against fascism could be a source of inspiration. The average American could look towards Alexander, Morgan or any of the other Americans fighting against Franco and be encouraged to tackle problems of racism, poverty, and discrimination. Alexander fought to be a catalyst that he thought the United States needed to enact change back home.

In 1980, Admiral Kilpatrick looked back on his time in the war with no regrets: “These people, including myself, went to Spain for a good cause, to fight against fascism... But I would like to remember it as one of the entities in the whole international struggle that is still taking place in the world today... I was a Communist. A Communist fights oppression, and they fight tyranny everywhere. So that’s the reason I went to Spain.”<sup>40</sup> The African American veterans of the Spanish Civil War looked back on their time in Spain fondly and with no hesitation. Whether they fought because of political

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 168.

ideology or because of transnational and racial unity, these soldiers embodied black activism and the idea of Pan-Africanism that reemerged after World War I. The interwar period came to a close with the Spanish Civil War, and the African Americans who went to Spain and fought entered the next stage of their lives and the fight for black freedom and equality with the war on their mind.

African-Americans did not change the tide of the Spanish Civil War in favor of the Republic. With support from both the Germans and Italians, Franco was simply too strong. Even so, African American participation in the war was still a successful expression of their great interest in global politics that was spurred on by international experiences, Pan-Africanism, and, most directly, the Second Italo-Ethiopian war. Though they had been denied the ability to provide anything but material support for Ethiopia, they still sought out their chance to fight for their race on the battlefield.

Spain was that chance, and with support from the American Communist Party, the Spanish Civil War allowed African-Americans to get revenge against the fascists who had stripped away the sovereignty of one of the only free black African nations. They fought for their politics, for Spain, for Ethiopia, and for the people back home.

As told by the veterans themselves, the Spanish Civil War was larger than the nation itself. As Crawford Morgan linked the racist policies of white nations all over the world, he found an opportunity to do more than protest in his own nation: “I got a chance to fight it there with bullets and I went there and fought it with bullets.”<sup>41</sup>

Neither the Italo-Ethiopian War or the Spanish Civil War were events that should have profoundly affected the African-American community in the 1930s, yet both

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 176.

drove many African-Americans to take on a greater role on the international stage. For many, Ethiopia was just the extension of a global race war against blacks and Spain provided them an opportunity to fight back. Those who looked back on the war did so with nothing but fondness. In 1980 Oscar Hunter conducted an interview with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives and was asked, “Would you go back and do it all again?” Hunter replied, “Yeah, every bit.”<sup>42</sup> The Spanish Civil War allowed African-Americans to look at white supremacy square in the face and pull the trigger in an attempt to not only defeat oppression, but to give people back home hope and inspiration that the battle against racism was a war worth fighting.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 162.

## **Conclusion**

The interwar period saw African Americans looking at the world in ways they had not done before. They were able to travel to new places, meet new people, experience new cultures, and develop a global consciousness when it came to the idea of race. It was the time African Americans spent in Europe that helped them create this consciousness and refine ideas of Pan-Africanism. Those who were able to make the journey to France, as well as those who never crossed the ocean, began to critically analyze what it meant to be black around the world. The examination of the idea of a colorblind France, in addition to sharing spaces with other members of the African diaspora, and the creation of the Pan-African Congresses forced African-American activism on to the international stage. Slowly but surely, it became more about the idea of black unity and less about ideas of civilization that pleased the white status quo.

African Americans who never were able to leave the country were not sitting out when it came to fighting for black people around the world. The black press decried the actions of the United States during their occupation of Haiti and blacks took to the streets and protested against the Italians during the Italo-Ethiopian War. Ethiopia became a symbol of black resistance and power during the 1930s for African Americans, and because of this they began to see that the fight was not only against colonialism, but also fascism. The Italo-Ethiopian War ended in an Ethiopian defeat, but the ideological battle continued during the Spanish Civil War. African Americans fought against Franco and his fascist army, with the likes of Langston Hughes and numerous veterans thinking that, not only were they fighting racist, authoritarian fascism, but also against the idea of white supremacy as a whole.



World War II disrupted the connection African Americans had with the European continent. The jazz scene in Montmartre faded away, with most leaving before the war, while others like Eugene Bullard were driven out because of it. Josephine Baker stayed and ended up working with the French government, becoming a spy. Many African Americans who fought in the Spanish Civil War were then drafted to fight for the United States during the Second World War, and it seemed like the work that had been done during the interwar period had been put on hold.

Yet African Americans did not stop their larger fight against racism as they had during the First World War. The “Double V” campaign came to mark the African American experience during World War II, as African Americans began arguing for victory abroad and victory at home. The Double V campaign meant defeating racist fascism on the world stage and defeating Jim Crow back home. The Pan-African Congress held in 1945, after the war, began the push not only for rights for colonized people, but for complete independence.

African Americans during the interwar period built upon the international activism that continued with Ida B. Wells, but they took it even further. They did not simply try to expose the dangers of Jim Crow or warn against the “Americanization” of the world, but they sought to fight against white dominance on a global scale. W.E.B. Dubois, Jessie Fauset, Langston Hughes, J.A. Rogers, and so many others who protested and even put their lives on the line against fascism built upon those that had come before them. They created an idea of international activism that only became more refined and effective as World War II ended and others joined the larger battle against global white hegemony.

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